

# **Christianity's impact on the free farmers during the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Norway**

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Medieval Culture

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## Summary

The purpose of my master thesis is to focus on the religious beliefs of the free farmers during the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Norway. I chose this particular century first and foremost because it represents the pitch of the Christianization process, because during this time Norway had both heathen and Christian rulers that influenced the free farmers in different ways, and because it probably was the time when Christianity had its biggest impact on people, on Norwegian soil.

In order to be able to make plausible conclusions regarding Christianity's impact on the Norwegian free farmers I made a thorough comparison between the old *siðr* and Christianity and I examined several helpful sources, from sagas to archaeological evidence, from skaldic poetry to law texts. I also analysed the first Christian elements on Norwegian soil and the farmers' experiences under the dominion of three different rulers (a tolerant Christian king, a heathen earl and an intolerant Christian missionary king).

Due to the time discrepancy and to the minimum amount of reliable sources, it is impossible to state anything regarding the free farmers' views about the new religion with complete certainty. However I managed in my thesis to give plausible explanations and conclusions regarding the change of *siðr* and its impact on a social group that has not yet been the centre of focus in other scholarly works.

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## Introduction

The first king that is given credit for missioning in Norway was King Haakon the Good. He reigned in Norway between 934 and 961. He had been baptized in England and wanted to convert the Norwegians to Christianity. Towards heathens he was said to be indulgent and on his death bed he was asked how he wanted to be buried. The idea that he died pagan is also found in the skaldic poem *Hákonarmál*. Around the year 970, Norway got another important ruler, Earl Haakon. Unlike King Haakon, Earl Haakon was a heathen who did not want to become Christian. He had to accept baptism in Denmark under the rule of Harald Bluetooth, only in order not to create a dispute with the Danish king. But as soon as he returned to Norway Earl Haakon sent all the Christian clergymen away from his land. He broke his connection with Denmark and started rebuilding the old sacred places in honour to the Norse gods:

Qll lét senn enn svinni  
sonn Einriða monnum  
herjum kunnr of herjuð  
hofs lönd ok vé banda;  
at veg jötna vitni  
valfalls of sæ allan  
(þeim stýra goð) geira  
garðs Hlóriði farði.<sup>1</sup>

After the reign of Earl Haakon, between 995 and 1000, Norway was ruled by its second Christian missionary king, Olav Tryggvason. According to some sagas, he tried to convert people not only by persuading them with riches and privileges, but also by using force and torture.

In chapter two I will focus on the earliest contacts of the Norsemen with Christianity. Although king Haakon the Good is considered to be the first missionary king in Norway, it does not mean that the Norwegians were strangers to Christianity. Norway was in constant contact with Europe, a contact that became intensive during the Viking Age. There are also archaeological sources that confirm that some of the Norsemen, especially those who lived around the coast lines, were already Christian before the reign of King Haakon the Good, or were at least influenced by Christianity. This supports the idea that the transitional process

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<sup>1</sup>*Vellekla* 14

was very long and complex and that the missionary kings were not the only ones responsible for the conversion of their people.

My thesis will focus primarily on the free farmers' reaction to Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In order to find some conclusions about this matter, I will also focus on the three rulers mentioned above and on how their religious beliefs and methods of leadership influenced the lives of the people. The Norse people got in contact with Christianity from early times mainly through trade and plundering. But as the archaeological material shows us, the new religion started to influence the Norwegian free farmers much more during the reign of King Haakon the Good, the first Christian king in Norway. Consequently the Christianization on Norwegian soil began with the first contacts of the people with the new religion. However, the actual process of conversion started with the missionary work of Haakon the Good. I choose to talk about the influence of Christianity during the reign of these three rulers because they are so different: Haakon the Good was an indulgent Christian who died pagan, Earl Haakon was heathen and Olav Tryggvason was Christian and imposed his religion to all the people that were under his dominion. As any authoritative figures, they had a big influence on their people, including from a religious point of view. Therefore Christianity had a different impact on the free farmers under each ruler. My goal is to find out and describe this impact, to determine how Christianity influenced the Norwegian free farmers and how they reacted to the change of *siðr* during the reign of Haakon the Good, Earl Haakon and Olav Tryggvason.

The Christian kings contributed the most in making Christianity the only official and allowed religion in Norway. But that does not necessarily mean that they actually had the power to change the true beliefs of the farmers. They could demand from their people to get baptized and to go to church, but that does not mean that they all embraced Christianity due to this reason, it does not mean that they actually believed in this faith. The ones who had the role of convincing the people to believe in the Christian God were the missionary priests.

The similarities and the differences between the Old Norse religion and Christianity are also important to highlight in order to come to conclusions related to the impact of the new belief on free farmers in Norway. As I will later point out there are more differences than similarities between the two and in order for the people to embrace Christianity they had to completely change their view upon life and upon the entire world itself. At the same time, in order for the new religion to become more popular among the Norse heathens, the missionary



priests took some aspects of the old views upon life and integrated them in their Christian preaching.

### **Definition of key terms**

In my thesis I want to determine the *impact* of Christianity on the free farmers during the reign of Haakon the Good, Earl Haakon and Olav Tryggvason. I want to identify the way the farmers reacted to the new religion under three rulers that were different from a spiritual point of view. According to sources such as skaldic poetry and sagas, some people were eager to embrace the new belief, while others needed to be persuaded into adopting the Christian ideology. Some, however, remained faithful to their old gods and although they had to accept baptism, they kept offering sacrifices to the gods in secrecy, as it can be denoted from the Gulating laws<sup>2</sup>. But no matter whether they embraced Christianity or not, it is certain that the new religion had a big impact on all individuals, including the free farmers on whom I will focus my attention. Probably the main reason why Christianity had such a big impact was because during the reign of Olav Tryggvason the laws of this religion became part of the laws of the country, and everybody had to follow them.

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century the people in Norway were divided into *social classes*. The top of the hierarchy was occupied by the *earl*, *chieftain* or *goði*, or by the *king*. The term ‘king’ was rather new in the Viking Age, as it was borrowed from other countries. Moreover, if someone was named king it did not necessarily mean that the same person was the most powerful in the country or region. As pictured in *Heimskringla*, for instance, the Lade earls were more powerful and more influential than King Haakon the Good. Also, since the terms ‘earl’, ‘chieftain’ and ‘goði’ were more familiar during the Viking Age, it is possible that the highest authorities could even prefer to be known by these terms instead of by the notion ‘king’.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that Norway during the 10<sup>th</sup> century looked different than it does today. It was divided into *smaller kingdoms* ruled by different chieftains, some being more powerful than others. Consequently, although I talk about a Norway, therefore a country, under the leadership of Haakon the Good, Earl Haakon and Olav Tryggvason, it does not mean that the reader should have in mind the picture of Norway from today, but instead the image that consists of the Norwegian regions under the domain of these rulers. The reason why I will not discuss the religious situation in the other

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<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 29 of the Gulating law it is stated that one would receive the harshest punishment for performing sacrifices to the heathen gods. This suggests that even after Christianity became the only accepted religion, there still were people who believed in the old faith and performed the old rituals.

Scandinavian countries during the 10<sup>th</sup> century is due to lack of space. Including the other Scandinavian territories would make my subject too wide for a dissertation thesis.

Next on the hierarchical scale there are the *haukd* and the *farmer*. These two categories are very similar and they represent the majority of the population, but the *haukd* could be richer than the farmer who did not necessarily own private land. Both the *haukd* and the farmer were free men and they represent the group of people on which I will focus my attention on mostly, group of people which I will simply call free farmers. Below the *haukd* and the farmer on the social scale there was the *freedman* and the *slave*. The freedman was similar to a slave, the difference between the two being that, unlike the freedman, the slave had no rights at all and could be sold, given away or probably even killed if becoming useless. Since the free farmers represented the largest group of people and since scholars have not been focused so much on their ideological situation during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, I decided to try to clarify in my thesis their religious status and the impact Christianity had upon them during the transition from heathendom to the monotheistic religion.

When it comes to the pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia, it is difficult to give it an exact description or definition. We have some sources, skaldic poems and runic inscriptions, that are prior to the conversion to Christianity, but they give us only little information about the old *siðr* itself. It is only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that we get a better picture of the old belief. At this time the population was already Christian and thus some of the information we get from then suffered an *interpretatio christiana*. Since these sources were written down long after the religious transition, it may be safe to assume that some of the information about the pre-Christian *siðr* was lost or deteriorated. We could say that we do not have any completely reliable sources that describe the old belief. But it is possible to develop some conclusions about pre-Christian Scandinavia, highlighting the religious situation in Norway during the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The old faith did not have a name and it was not considered to be as much a religion, but more as a custom or tradition. The Old Norse name for this custom was *siðr*. Unlike Christianity the old belief was not a book-religion and it was not meant to expand outside the Scandinavian borders. There were many regional differences in this belief and in some places some gods and goddesses could be more popular than in others. There was not just one *siðr*. Since it is not a written religion, there were also differences in cult and rituals. Thus we could

say that the old faith was flexible on the belief plan, unlike Christianity, which is stricter from this perspective.

Probably the most important difference between the two is that the old *siðr* was *polytheistic*, while Christianity was *monotheistic*. This must have been helpful in the beginning for the Christian missionaries because the Norsemen probably had no difficulties adding another god to their pandemonium, namely the Christian God. Although the clergymen were probably not satisfied with this matter, polytheism was a beneficial factor in the transition to Christianity. The fact that the new religion was monotheistic and that the single God was a man was different from the old *siðr* in which the pandemonium was composed both by male and by female powers. This also modified the view upon society, especially upon women who, before the transition were almost equal to men, in some cases they could have their own properties and they could even get a divorce. After the transition to Christianity the status of women was lowered. They were not allowed to be leaders anymore, not even cult leaders<sup>3</sup>. Although monotheistic, the new religion was able to integrate in a pagan world thanks to the Christian belief in saints and angels. Even though they were not gods, they were God's helpers, making the religion more approachable. The newly converted Christians probably had a strong belief in saints and angels and considered them protectors. However, the poetry from the 10<sup>th</sup> century that we still have does not mention any saints or apostles, not even Virgin Mary, Christ's mother. She is mentioned nonetheless on some runic inscriptions<sup>4</sup>. It is believed that the first big saint in Scandinavia was King Olav II Haraldsson. A possible reason for why scholars such as Paasche believe that the Norsemen did not adopt foreign saints during the transition to Christianity is that first the people must learn about and understand Jesus Christ and his apostles, and only after that they can learn about the saints and the angels.

Another important attribute of Christianity that was completely new for the heathens was its *dualism*. The Christian belief teaches us that Almighty God, who is the representative of Good, battles against the devil, the representative of Evil. In the old *siðr* there was no such distinction between good and evil. The gods and goddesses were not all good and the giants were not all bad. Not only that the new religion brought with it a battle between Good and Evil, but people also had to choose a side in this battle. If they were on the Good side they would have a better chance to save their souls and to reign in Heaven by God's side. But if

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<sup>3</sup> Steinsland 1996: 25

<sup>4</sup> Paasche 1958: 104

they chose the Evil side their souls would definitely have to suffer eternally in Hell. God's kindness is expressed by the idea that He sent His son, Jesus Christ to Earth in order for Him to get sacrificed for the people's salvation. This concept was new and different for the heathens who could not understand why they should believe in and praise someone who is suffering. They saw Christ's suffering as immoral. Thus, until during the Late Middle Ages, Jesus was shown on the cross, on paintings and sculptures not as a humble, suffering being, but as a *victorious king*, so that people could identify themselves better with the Holy Son of God.

An important missionary strategy was to approach the heathens that they wanted to convert to Christianity was through the similarities that existed between the two faiths. For instance, *loyalty* was important in both ideologies. But, unlike in heathendom where the gods perceived loyalty as an ideal although they were not always following this ideal<sup>5</sup>, Jesus Christ was a perfect example for loyalty. If we consider *Lokasennato* be a heathen poem, then it may be concluded that this morale, even though it existed before the religious transition, was not used against the gods when they did not behave exemplary. The Christians, on the other hand, viewed their God as *moral* and as an example to be followed. And since the Norse gods were not always behaving admirable, in this case, that they were not always loyal and moral, was used against them by the Christians. By being the perfect model for the morale he gave, the Christian God gained more popularity among the heathens.

Another similarity is that in both faiths *slander* and *gossip* were considered bad and unfair. In heathen times, one had the right to kill another if that person spread gossip or slander against him. After the transition to Christianity though, those acts were not only wrong towards the individual, but also towards God. As Fredrik Paasche mentions in *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom*, some of Moses' commandments were easily accepted by the heathens. It was not difficult for the Norwegian heathen farmers to agree with the laws saying that one should honour their parents, one should not steal or one should not make false accusations about another. And according to Paasche, even the commandment saying that one should not kill could be well accepted by the heathens, since there were punishments against the ones who committed crime without a just reason already before the transition to Christianity.

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<sup>5</sup> This idea can be denoted from the eddic poem *Lokasenna*. However, since it is impossible to date the poem with certainty, we cannot be sure whether it was written from a heathen perspective or from a Christian one which was aiming to mock the old faith.

## Sources

My primary sources are mainly represented both by texts and by archaeological finds. The main problem that we deal with when it comes to the written sources is that they are not always historically accurate. The reason for this is first of all because they were written down long after the events took place. Until then these events survived only in the oral tradition, which can easily corrupt their certainty. The actions and lives of the kings were most likely willingly altered by the writers of the sagas in order to make the texts more entertaining or for ideological reasons. It is clear that Theodoricus Monachus, Oddr Snorresson, the author of *Ágrip* and Snorre Sturlason added some changes in their depictions of rulers such as Earl Haakon or Olav Tryggvason. They most probably made King Tryggvason look more saint-like, braver and more adored by his men. They gave him more qualities than he had or amplified his qualities. This happened most likely due to subjective reasons such as: both writers were Christian and wanted to make the actions and life of a Christian king more intensified; they wanted to make him look like a fitting saint. Especially Monachus and Snorresson gave the heathen earl a more evil or demonic image most likely due to his spiritual beliefs, but also in order to create a stronger contrast between Earl Haakon and Olav Tryggvason, contrast that could reflect the Christian king's greatness as seen through their eyes. But still, this does not mean that their writings are not good sources. Therefore, I will use Theodoricus Monachus's *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, Oddr Snorresson's *Soga om Olav Tryggvason*, *Ágrip* and Snorre Sturlason's *Heimskringla*, or the *The History of the Norse Kings*, as primary sources. From *Heimskringla* I will extract only the sagas that are relevant to the period of time and the rulers that I will write about in my thesis, namely the ones about Haakon the Good, the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe, Earl Haakon and Olav Tryggvason. These sagas will help me find out how the free farmers reacted towards the transition to Christianity and what impact this transition had upon them under three different and important rulers. The reason why I include the saga about the Eirikssons is because they were the immediate successors of Haakon the Good and the saga gives useful background information about the religious situation in Norway before the rule of Earl Haakon.

I will use *The saga of the Jomsvikings* as a source because it describes the battle between Earl Haakon and the Jomsvikings. The most relevant episode for my thesis described by this saga is the one in which the earl makes offerings and even sacrifices his youngest son in order to win the battle. Although it cannot be certain that this event actually took place, I believe it is too important to leave it behind and not to comment on it. *Fagrskinna* also contains a chapter

that is relevant to my thesis, namely chapter 14. Here the saga emphasizes the idea that the country became prosperous after the Eirikssons were replaced by Earl Haakon. There are also other sagas that have relevant information in connection to my subject, among which: *Ynglinga saga*, *Eirik the Red's saga*, *Harald Hairair's saga*, and *Víga-Glúms Saga*. Besides the sagas, I will use chapters of another book that is similar in genre, namely *Landnámabók*, or *The book of Settlements*. As its title suggest, the book describes the Norse settlements in Iceland. This work is important to my thesis because it does not describe only the settlements, but it also gives valuable details about Christianization and about the impact of the new religion on the heathen farmers. Since *Landnámabók* covers a longer period of time, I will only focus on the chapters about events that took place in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Another type of written sources that I will deal with is law books that contain laws given during the transition from the old religion to Christianity. Books such as *Gulatingssloven* and *Eidsivatingssloven* will help me see to what extent the laws changed after the imposing of Christianity. By analysing the Christian laws, I will be able to find out how much the change of religion influenced the lives of the free farmers, as well as important information regarding the farmers' will to abandon the old customs and to adopt Christian ones.

In addition, I will use as primary sources probably the most important texts that we have about Norse mythology. I believe that they are the most important ones because, without them, we would probably be unable to describe this mythology. These two essential works are the *Poetic Edda*, written in the 1270s, and the *Prose Edda* written by Snorre Sturlason also in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Even though there are not many important differences between the two eddas and even though it is known that they are both written in a Christian environment, centuries after the end of the Christianization process, and therefore the pre-Christian religion has an *interpretatio christiana*, I believe they can still be helpful at least in pointing out how the old *siðris* seen through Christian eyes, thus giving me background information about my subject.

Another important type of literature that will help me make conclusions about the impact of Christianity on the free farmers in Norway is represented by skaldic poetry. This type of source is extremely important especially because it is (or at least some of its material is) contemporary with the historical period that I will focus on. For instance, we have several skaldic poems written by the kings' skalds, some poems being of heathen nature, while others being Christian, depending on the king to whom they are dedicated. Some of the most

important skalds that I will deal with in my thesis are Hallfreðr Óttarsson, Eyvindr Finnsson, Eilífr Guðrúnarson, Einarr skálaglamm Helgason and Skapti Þóroddsson.

Besides texts, I will also use runic inscriptions and archaeological finds as primary sources. There are not many sources of this type available from the period between 934 and 1000 in Norway that are relevant to the main theme of my thesis. Nevertheless there are others that help me find out more about, for instance, the earliest traces of Christianity or about Christian influences on heathen traditions and the existence of a religious syncretism present during the Christianization process.

The letter bishop Daniel of Winchester sent to the missionary clergyman Bonifatius in 723/24 also represents a good source of information, this time regarding the strategies used by the missionary priests in converting the people to Christianity. The missionaries had to be wise and well trained in order to be able to face and convince the heathen farmers to receive baptism. In this letter bishop Daniel of Winchester describes some of the best methods used in such situations. These methods emphasize not only the cunningness of the priests, but also the character of the heathen farmers, the values they praised and the things they rejected.

### **Historiography**

There have been written many books and articles that deal with the transition from the old faith to Christianity. This subject has been treated by different disciplines such as history, archaeology, history of religion and art history. But although this matter is so popular and although it has been examined from many points of view, the scholars have not concentrated on how the Norwegian free farmers reacted to Christianity.

Scholars have focused on many things concerning the transitional period such as on the reasons for implementing Christianity, who could get more advantages from the change of religion, how this process took place or the relationship between ruler ideology and religion, but they have not focused much specifically on the subject that I will write about. An important scholar who did highlight the Christian impact on the Norwegians was Fredrik Paasche. *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i Norden* published in 1958 is based on his doctoral thesis, *Kristendom og kvad: en studie i norrøn middelalder* (1914), and on his radio program. This book indicates Paasche's focus on making a comparison between the old *siðr* and Christianity. He pointed out important heathen traits that could not be accepted by the Christian law and how Christianity was perceived by the ordinary people such as the free farmers. He's work was also focused on missionary activity in Scandinavia, on the social

function of worshipping the heathen gods and how this was transformed into a Christian act. The scholar also identified possible similarities between Jesus Christ and different heathen gods such as Baldir and Thor. His work is helpful for my thesis because the ideas that Paasche presents are inspiring. However, I do not believe that Paasche's main focus was to present the impact of Christianity on the free farmers in Norway. He does mention some hypothesis concerning this matter, but he does not develop them very much. In my opinion, he tries to focus on too many motifs in not so many pages. Therefore I could say that his book is a good starting point, but that his ideas concerning the impact of Christianity and the people's reaction to the new religion must be further developed in order to arrive to some more detailed conclusions.

Two collections of articles that analyse the transition from the old faith to Christianity in Norway are *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i Norge* (1995) and *Fra hedendom til kristendom. Perspektiver på religionsskiftet i Norge* (1996). In these two collections, important scholars in fields such as history, history of religion, history of art and archaeology try to find answers to questions related to the transition from heathendom to Christianity. Gro Steinsland's article *The Change of Religion in the Nordic Countries – A Confrontation between Two Living Religions* (1990) is also relevant to my subject, mainly because it demonstrates that the old faith did not die out before or when Christianity came to Scandinavia. By the time the Christian missionaries came to Norway, the majority of the population was still heathen and was still practicing the old rites and rituals and they were still making sacrificial offerings to the old gods.

### **Theory and Method**

When interpreting and analysing the texts I will focus not only on the texts themselves, but also on the historical context in which they appeared. Many of these sources were written down some hundreds years after the historical events took place. Therefore it is important to pay attention to whether the author is aware of the historical discrepancy or not. The more aware he is of the time span, the more credible his text will appear. It is also possible that the Christian authors tried to give the old *siðra* bad image, to consider the old gods as being false idols, demons or devils, to see the old practices as devilish or to condemn the believers of the old faith of being possessed or of not thinking clear. The reasons why some authors had these points of view may be because they were subjective or just did not or could not understand the old belief except through a Christian perspective. An example is the representation of Earl Haakon of Lade made by Theodoricus Monachus and by Oddr Snorrason. These authors only



highlight the earl's negative traits and portray him as a devilish, evil figure. The reason for this may be due to his religious beliefs, but also in order to highlight through contrast the good qualities of Olav Tryggvason. Consequently we cannot give credit to such subjective characterizations. Snorri Sturluson too tries in *Heimskringla* to portray Earl Haakon in a negative way, making him look infamous. However, he is less critical in comparison with the other two scholars and he also shows some positive aspects about the ruler, at times even seeming to admire him. Nevertheless, Sturluson also uses Earl Haakon as a contra-example and as an inferior ruler compared to King Olav Tryggvason. The descriptions from *Heimskringla* suggest that the Lade earl is used as a tool in portraying the greatness of the two missionary kings to come.

In my dissertation I will analyse the law texts that are helpful in order to develop good conclusions regarding my subject. Although they are not considered as subjective as the other texts that I will go through, it is still important to interpret them correctly and to pay attention to them in order to find the information I need. The laws may offer insight about Christian fundamentals that were difficult to adopt and about the heathen practices and traditions which were the most important for the free farmers. Their importance can be deduced by the severity of the punishment applied to those who would refuse to abandon them.

When analysing the archaeological material as well as the runic inscriptions I will also take into consideration their historical context, when and where they were found, under what circumstances, what was their purpose and how they can help me in my research. I will also be aware of the fact that some objects found in burial grounds, for instance, may not necessarily be of Norwegian Viking origin, and therefore may not help me. Since the Vikings travelled so much and since they were also merchants, it is demonstrated that they brought home with them these objects from different countries.

I believe that the most problematic issue in my research will be dealing with literary/historical sources such as the sagas or the eddas, because they can all be considered, to a certain extent, subjective. When analysing them, one must interpret the stories from behind the texts. One must be able to tell when the writer is subjective and when not. In order to do so, it is important to check the provenance of the text, copies of it, if there are any, and to check whether the same information appears in several other sources. Even if the writer is not necessarily influenced by the new religion, he may still be influenced by the common mentality of his time and therefore give a wrong image of the events. In order to make it

easier to decide when the author is subjective or objective, one must also keep in mind the background, the society and the context in which an author writes a text. In order to discover more about Christianity's impact on the free farmers in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Norway I will carefully use the sources within the source criticism developed around the Norse literature.

## **Chapter I: A comparison between Norse heathendom and Christianity**

### **Chapter I.1: Introduction**

In order to understand the impact that Christianity had upon the free farmers in Norway during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it is first of all important to find out how different the two religions were. The more different they were the deeper was the impact of the transition. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Norway people had already been in contact with Christianity for several decades and some of them chose to adopt the new religion in favour of the old one. But, at the same time, as several sagas<sup>6</sup> tell us, some people did not want to give up the old *siðr* and it was very difficult for the missionaries to convince them that Christianity was better.

A comparison between the heathen *siðr* and Christianity may help us to discover how it was possible for the free farmers to give up the old faith. As I will point out, the two faiths are different and they present the world in two distinct ways. In order for the free farmers to abandon their old belief and to adopt Christianity they probably must have changed their entire way of thinking and of viewing life, death, afterlife and spirituality. I believe that a comparison between the two faiths may help in finding out the similarities between them, similarities that were probably used by the missionaries to make the transition easier, to make Christianity more popular in the eyes of the farmers. The identification of the similarities and the differences between the pre-Christian *siðr* and Christianity might also give important hints about the transitional process, whether it took a long period of time or not and what does that say about the impact that it had on the farmers.

### **Chapter I.2: Polytheism and monotheism**

One of the main differences between the two religions is that the old one is polytheistic, while Christianity is monotheistic. The pre-Christian Norsemen had a pandemonium which consisted of several gods and goddesses. Moreover, the heathens believed also in other supernatural entities such as giants and giantesses, norns, Valkyries, elves, or dwarfs. In contrast, Christianity recognizes only one true, all-powerful and all-knowing God. The entities praised by heathens were considered evil demons in the eyes of the new religion. But since the old tradition had numerous divine entities, it was not difficult for the believers to add one more god to their pandemonium. Therefore the Christian god was probably easily accepted by most heathens.

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<sup>6</sup> Such as the saga collection *Heimskringla* and *Saga om Olav Trygvason*. Etter Odd munk Snorresson

### Chapter I.3: Tolerance

It is believed that the old *siðr* was open and tolerant and does not deny the existence of other gods and which may welcome other gods in its pandemonium if these gods are considered to be helpful. This trait of the old faith may be explained by the fact that many Norsemen travelled to foreign lands where people had different beliefs than them. In order to, for instance, have a good trade in that countries, they needed to be in good relations with the local gods so that they would provide them profit. But, as Gro Steinsland makes it clear in her article *Hvordan ble hedendommen utfordret og påvirket av kristendommen?* this characteristic does not make the old *siðr* weak and easily influenced by other beliefs. She continues by adding that due to this tolerance and openness to other religions heathendom was often misinterpreted in literature and she exemplifies her statement through the fact that some moulding forms which had patterns both for the Thor's hammer and the Christian cross were seen as testimony to how weak the old *siðr* was becoming. Steinsland defends her theory by stating that the openness of the pre-Christian faith is not a sign of weakness, but a representative property of this religion. Moreover, the old belief did not forbid the usage of symbols that belonged to other religions as long as those symbols proved to be useful and powerful<sup>7</sup>. This tolerance towards other religions represents one quality that made the transition to Christianity more manageable and easier for the missionaries to spread the words of Christianity. But after the new religion gets its first roots I believe it is safe to say that the tolerance of the old belief became not so useful anymore. Since Christianity is a monotheistic religion, it was not acceptable to believe that there are also other gods; all the heathen divine entities were transformed now in demons and workers of evil. For the heathen believers it must have been hard to have their divinities being demonized. Christianity is not tolerant towards the other divinities and therefore the people had to believe just in one God who was the only real and all-powerful god. This was probably more difficult to do than just to add another god in the pandemonium. Thus, the belief in saints and protective angels was probably very popular during the transition to Christianity and also after that. This could represent a good replacement to the polytheistic belief. Even though the belief in saints and angels was popular, we do not have any written sources from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries that mention any foreign saint names<sup>8</sup>. Virgin Mary was not mentioned much either, as far as the available sources can tell, and we only have few runic inscriptions from this period that refer

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<sup>7</sup> Steinsland 1995: 12-13

<sup>8</sup> Paasche 1958: 104

to her<sup>9</sup>. The reason for this may be the fact that the saints got their power through Christ or through their relation to him and in order for them to be understood by the Norsemen, first the missionaries had to preach about them so that the people can get to know and believe in them. The oldest saint in Norway is perhaps St. Sunniva who became a martyr on Selja in Nordfjord around the year 996<sup>10</sup>. But Norway's biggest saint is without a doubt St. Olav, the third missionary king. The worship of a dead ruler was not a new thing in Scandinavia; people used to do this also in the heathen times when the king or the ruler was considered to be of divine blood<sup>11</sup>. During and after the religious transition, the Christian king was no longer blood related to God, but he was God's representative on earth; he was chosen by God to do his will and to rule. According to Fredrik Paasche the reason why the belief in saints and angels after the transition to Christianity was so popular is that people probably needed supernatural helpers and miracles in order to hold their faith alive<sup>12</sup>.

#### **Chapter I.4: Women and religion**

The heathen *siðr* was not only polytheistic, but it consisted of both male and female entities. The perception of the woman on a spiritual level has consequences also on an earthly, profane level. Women probably occupied a good position in the Scandinavian society compared to the rest of Europe. They were almost equal to men and benefited of many rights, among which the right to get a divorce or, in special circumstances, to own property. Moreover, they could even be cult leaders or in some cases participate in Viking expeditions. The fact that Christianity was monotheistic and that the one God was male had a big influence on the status of women. According to the Christian laws women could no longer be cult leaders. In addition they got a more subordinate position in the man-woman relationship. According to the Christian dogma, the woman should have a lower position than the man first of all due to the fact that she was created after the creation of man. She received a secondary role or a secondary status. Furthermore, Christianity states that the woman is more impure than the man. This can be explained through the fact that the new religion makes a clear distinction between body and soul, where the body's functions are impure. Since women have a bigger role in reproduction than men and thus use their body more than men in the process, they are considered more impure and therefore are not to be trusted in the leadership

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<sup>9</sup> Examples: the Fyrby stone and the Rysbyle stone, both from Uppland, Sweden, 11<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>10</sup> Rindal 1996: 16

<sup>11</sup> *Ynglinga*

<sup>12</sup> Paasche 1958: 103

of the cult<sup>13</sup>. This change of perception must have had a powerful impact on women and it is likely that the impact was not a positive one since they lost so much of their status and power.

### **Chapter I.5: *Heiðinn dómr* and *kristinn dómr***

Unlike Christianity, the Norse belief did not have a specific name; people called their belief simply as *siðr* which means custom or tradition. Thus the pre-Christian faith was not perceived as a religion in the way Christianity was. *Siðr* was something more related to the community, to local conventions and to lineage. Even the contemporary name for the change of religion was named after the denomination of the custom: *siðaskipti* ('change of custom'). During the transitional period a new appellative appeared in relation to the old *siðr*, which is *heiðinn dómr*. This concept is believed to be a parallel to *kristinn dómr* which means Christianity<sup>14</sup>. The second compound of the word can be translated with 'to judge'. Unlike *dómr*, *heiðinn* is problematic when it comes to translating it. The word may be the same as *hede* which could mean 'area outside the society' or 'outsider'. If this is the correct interpretation of the word then we may conclude that this is a term created by Christians who saw the old belief as something marginal and its followers as outsiders. But there is reason to believe that this explanation might be erroneous due to the fact that it is used not only by Christians, but also by the believers in the Norse faith. We have evidence of usage of the term by heathens in skaldic poetry by skalds such as Eyvindr Finnsson, Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld, Tindr Hallkelsson and Sigvatr Þórðarson. Jan de Vries suggests that the term had a different meaning, namely 'common land' or 'area owned by the community', a place where everyone goes to. If de Vries is right, then the designation would not have a negative connotation and would not necessarily mean that it was created by Christians. But no matter what the explanation of the word is, one thing is certain: it appeared during the transition to Christianity. This fact may reflect a new need of the people to name their faith, need that came after an extensive contact with the monotheistic religion. Thus, it may be possible that Christianity influenced the heathens in naming their faith.

### **Chapter I.6: Ethnic *siðr* and universal religion**

According to Gro Steinsland and other scholars, the pre-Christian faith in Scandinavia was an ethnic one. That means it consisted of a body of customs, beliefs and cult forms and it was connected to separate groups or classes of people or communities and their own territories. Thus, the traditions were not necessarily the same all over heathen Scandinavia. Each group

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<sup>13</sup> Steinsland 1996: 25

<sup>14</sup> Steinsland 1995: 8

of people probably had its own set of rules, customs and beliefs. For instance, Odin was the god of the kings and chieftains, of the skalds and the warriors, while Thor was the protector god of the farmers in Norway and Iceland<sup>15</sup>. It is also called an ethnic faith because it was present and connected to the social and cultural matters of the community. Since it was tied to everyday life, it is reasonable to believe that the transitional process was a slow one and that the conversion was not always easy. Many scholars agree to the fact that the transition took place during several centuries, beginning around the year 800 and ending at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the ethnic *siðr* postulates that a member of a certain group of people is also a member of the group's system of beliefs. The social community is identical with the religious community. In the article *Hvordan ble hedendommen utfordret og påvirket av kristendommen?*, Gro Steinsland concludes that the most severe crimes committed against the social community would be punished with exile from the religious fellowship, meaning that one could be banned from the religious ceremonies and from contacting the gods and the other divine powers. As some Icelandic sagas confirm, it must have been frightening not to be able to connect and interact with the gods because this might lead them to becoming unhelpful, disadvantageous or even harmful. Christianity, on the other hand, does not have such a rule. God loves everyone, anyone could get in contact with him through prayer, no matter if that person was a convict or not, and everyone had a chance at salvation. Therefore, I believe it was easy to convert heathens that were exiled. Also, the guarantee that God loves everyone no matter who they were could have made Christianity a more approachable religion<sup>17</sup>.

In contrast with the heathen faith, Christianity is a universal religion and a religion of salvation<sup>18</sup>. It is not characteristic to small groups of people, but to the entire humanity because its message was considered important for everyone. The Christian priests wanted to spread the message about God's plan to offer salvation to all people, in all the corners of the earth. Therefore a strong need for missionary activity was developed. The missionary clergymen wanted to convert as many heathens as possible in order to help them save their souls from eternal damnation. They wanted to enlighten the people about how they can receive God's salvation.

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<sup>15</sup> Paasche 1958: 80

<sup>16</sup> Steinsland 1995: 11

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.12

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.11

In a universal religion the individual is the important one, while in an ethnic one the collective and the lineage are essential. The old *siðr* values the continuity of the kin and is oriented towards the collective. The collective was so important in the heathen world that even after the conversion to Christianity it played a very crucial role. For instance, individuals would get identities first and foremost through their kin and their identity would be connected to the entire family. As a proof to how important the kin was, even nowadays we can find Scandinavian people who have their last names after one of their family members, usually after the father. Unlike the old faith, Christianity is characterized by individuality<sup>19</sup>. According to the new belief, each and every individual is responsible for their own eternal life after death. The major way of thinking is pointed towards the individual and not towards the community; each person should decide for the fate of their own soul. Although Christianity preaches about individual salvation, many years after the transition to the new religion it was considered that sin was communal and the entire community was responsible to keep it away. The sin was perceived as a plague that could be transmitted from one person to another. Therefore it was everyone's responsibility to keep it away or to punish the sinner.

#### **Chapter I.7: Old and new ideas**

Concepts such as salvation, sin, damnation or eternity were completely new. *Siðr* did not consist of such ideas<sup>20</sup>. The new terms open the people's eyes to a different perception of the world, to a distinct orientation and interpretation of life. Unlike the Christian ethic, the heathen one was controlled by a different set of concepts, namely by honour and shame. Honour was crucial in the pre-state society especially due to the inexistence of written laws and. With concepts such as honour and shame it was assumingly easier to keep a certain order in the community; if someone, for instance, did something against somebody else, then that person was supposed to get revenge in order to keep his/her honour, thus punishing the criminal. Since honour was so significant in the pre-Christian mentality, it was difficult for the missionary men to make the heathens understand that it is important to be able to 'turn the other cheek' and that humbleness is more valuable than honour. Christianity promotes the idea that one must not seek revenge, thing which may have sounded abominable according to the heathen point of view and scholars such as Fredrik Paasche believe that this Christian virtue was probably not preached much during the missionary period. Moreover, he believes that it was easier for the missionary clergymen to preach only about other virtues and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.18



Christian qualities such as being good to the poor<sup>21</sup>. Paasche points out the fact that it was more manageable to make people interested in the new religion by first mentioning the morals that were common to both faiths. It is plausible to believe that being humble would represent an act of cowardice and it would be seen as low by the heathens or the newly converted Christians. Therefore it took a long time for the Norsemen to actually accept the idea that humbleness is a virtue and that they should not be ashamed of being humble.

Since honour was crucial in the heathen world, Christ was pictured on the cross not as a suffering and humble son, but as a victorious king until as late as the last part of the middle ages<sup>22</sup>. This unique picture of the son of God was created by clergymen due to the belief that the Norsemen would not accept to believe in a God that shows humility because this humbleness is probably a sign of weakness from their point of view. And due to the perception that honour was important, they would refuse to worship a weak god.

### **Chapter I.8: Loyalty**

One ideal that was common to both faiths was loyalty. In pre-Christian Scandinavia this value probably arose due to the idea that *siðr* was so strongly connected to the group, community or kin. In order to have a powerful and resistant group one had to, among other things, be loyal towards the other members who were usually either family or friends. From sources such as eddas and sagas we find out that loyalty was an important trait also for the heathen gods. They value this virtue, but that does not mean that they also follow this ideal all the time<sup>23</sup>. For instance we believe that Odin was not always loyal to his people; he first makes his heroes victorious, but then he makes them fail in battles probably so that he can have them in Valhalla to prepare them for Ragnarok. Probably most of the examples of disloyalty attributed to the gods can be found in the eddic poem *Lokasenna*. In this poem Loki reminds the gods of their own immorality. Although the poem is written down after the conversion to Christianity and can therefore be considered unreliable, some of the gods' defects mentioned by Loki in this poem are confirmed also in other sources such as *The Prose Edda*, thus I would conclude that the poem should be regarded as trustworthy. Some of the gods and goddesses that are accused by Loki of not being loyal are Odin, Frigg and Freya. The Christian God, on the other hand, not only that he wants his followers to be loyal, he is also the perfect example of loyalty. God was a model of the morale that he preached, unlike

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<sup>21</sup> Paasche 1958: 85

<sup>22</sup> Steinsland 1996: 25

<sup>23</sup> Paasche 1958: 113-114

the heathen gods. This might have won Christianity more popularity among the heathens; they praised loyalty before converting to the new religion, but now they also had the guarantee that the new God is also the best example when it comes to having this quality. Hjalti Skeggjason, a heathen skald that later embraced Christianity, accused Freya of being unfaithful at the heathen Allting in Iceland. Although he was blamed of being blasphemous and punished with exile, he defended himself by stating that his new religion allowed him to accuse the gods if they preach a morale that they do not follow themselves.

### **Chapter I.9: Slander**

One of the things that were disregarded both by heathens and by Christians was slander<sup>24</sup>. Even before the transition to the new religion, there was an unwritten law saying that one could kill another person if that person spread scandalous, fake gossip that could seriously ruin one's reputation. Since honour was important in pre-Christian Scandinavia and even after the transition to the new religion, it was crucial to seek revenge if someone degraded one's prestige through slander. After the change of religion this disgraceful act was not only considered unjust towards a person or a group of people, but also towards God. According to Fredrik Paasche and other scholars, during the 10<sup>th</sup> century this injustice was not named sin; he states that the concept of 'sin' appeared for the first time in Norway only in the beginning of the 1030's<sup>25</sup>. This happened so probably due to the idea that it was difficult for the missionaries to preach such a big amount of new information to the people. They probably wanted to make sure first that the heathens actually learned and understood other characteristics of the new religion, characteristics that the missionaries found to be more approachable. At the same time, it is plausible to believe that if the idea of sin was introduced too early, people would have rejected Christianity and would have not embraced a religion that preached about the possibility to suffer eternally after death due to having sinned.

### **Chapter I.10: Similar laws**

As Paasche mentions in the book *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i norden*, it was presumably easier for the missionary clergymen to first preach about some of Moses' laws that could be understood by the heathens, laws that could be accepted by them due to the fact that they presented similarities with their previous set of beliefs. For instance, the heathen farmers must have agreed with and accepted freely the law saying that one should honour their parents. This value was already in heathen times a highly regarded quality and people

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 114

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 115

honoured not only their parents, but their entire kin, no matter whether the relatives were alive or dead. The only difference is that after the introduction of Christianity honour should coexist with humbleness and should only be praised as long as it would not make one forget about how important it is to be submissive and modest. In the Christian context honour should not be confused with the right to take revenge.

There are also other Christian commandments that could be accepted by heathens<sup>26</sup>. For instance, they could agree with the fact that one should not steal or that one should not make false testimonies. As we have already seen, slander was highly disregarded already in the heathen society. Moreover, since honour was genuinely respected and since stealing was dishonourable, we could conclude that stealing was considered an infamous act also before the introduction of Christianity. It is very possible that the Norsemen could also agree with the commandment saying that one should not kill since already before the conversion to Christianity the heathens had an unwritten law saying that one could be punished for murder if the person committing the crime did not have a good argument or excuse for his action.

### **Chapter I.11: The tree**

The tree is an important symbol in the old belief. Yggdrasil, the world tree, is the axis mundi of the Nordic perspective of the universe. It is also important in the microcosms where it is represented by the tree from the farms and it symbolized the connection between the farm and the family that owns the farm. This family consists of both living members and ancestors, of the whole lineage. The tree is also important in the Christian belief<sup>27</sup>. In *Genesis* chapter 3, two very important trees are mentioned: the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. Adam and Eve are deceived by the Devil that came to them in the shape of a serpent to take a bite from an apple from the tree of knowledge. Since God forbade the two humans to eat from either one of these two trees and since they did not listen, they were punished by being sent away from Paradise. Their action also led to the coming of sin over mankind. The tree of life, on the other hand, is a parallel to the tree on which Christ was crucified in order to save people from damnation. As Gro Steinsland points out, there is a similarity between Yggdrasil and Christ's cross: the first represents the Norse cosmological centre, while the last symbolizes the Medieval centre of life<sup>28</sup>. The difference between the two trees is that the first one is an ash tree, while the tree used in making Christ's cross is a vine tree. This can easily be

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.116

<sup>27</sup> Steinsland 1996: 25-26

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.27

explained by the fact that in Northern Europe it is more likely to find ash trees, while the vine tree was popular in the South. Moreover, since the wine represents the blood of Jesus Christ, it is natural that his cross was made out of vine tree. There can also be made a parallel between Odin's hanging in Yggdrasil and Christ's crucifixion. They both are sacrificed, although their purposes for the sacrifice are different. Odin hangs himself from Yggdrasil for nine nights in order to receive the knowledge of the runes which are not only used in writing, but are also very powerful from a magical perspective. His action shows that no sacrifice is too much when it comes to acquiring more knowledge. Unlike Odin, Jesus Christ's sacrifice is not subjective. He lets himself be crucified in order to save the entire humanity from sin. Another common trait between these two sacrifices is that both Odin and Christ are wounded with a spear. However, the Norse myth might be influenced by the Christian one since it was written down after the conversion, by a Christian.

### **Chapter I.12: The apple**

Another central motif in both faiths is the apple<sup>29</sup>. However, it has very different meanings from one belief to another. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri Sturlason perceives the goddess Idun as the guardian of the gods' apples. These fruit were believed to be the source of the gods' immortality and therefore they represent strength and eternal life. Without them, the gods would be powerless and prone to disease and death. From here we can conclude that the Norse gods were not all-powerful and eternal, as the Christian God. We also find the motif of the apples in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*, where Skírnir offers Gerd 11 golden apples in exchange for her agreeing to marry Frey. In this context the apple symbolizes love and fertility. In the Christian context this fruit has a totally different connotation; here it represents the apple eaten by Adam and Eve that led to the curse of mankind. Therefore it symbolizes the object of deceive and sadness.

### **Chapter I.13: Seiðr**

One very important element of *seiðr* witchcraft<sup>30</sup>. According to Paasche witchcraft was considered as important as the gods. The old name for magic was *seiðr* and, while religion helps one achieve something through the help of the gods, *seiðr* is much more independent. It is something that one can do by oneself, without asking for divine assistance. Magic consisted of prophecies, reading of omens, *galdr* (a type of witchcraft done with a high pitch voice; it is a sort of yelling) and *gand* (magic carving such as carving runes on a staff),

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 29

<sup>30</sup> Paasche 1958: 81

gender transgression, abnormal sexuality, trance, travelling of the spirits and shape shifting. *Seiðr*, although important in heathen times, was also very controversial. It was normal for a woman to do it, but if a man practiced it, he was accused of being *ergi*, which is being perverted, acting like the passive member in a homosexual couple. The male sorcerers were probably looked down upon, as we can find an example of this in *Harald Hårfagre's Saga* 36, in *Heimskringla*, where Ragnvald Rettilbeine was burned to death in a house along with other warlocks like him, by his own brother, King Erik Blood-axe, only because he practiced witchcraft. On the other hand, a woman that practiced *seiðr*, a *völva*, was, according to *Landnámabók* 50, not a marginal person, but a woman that was powerful, had a good status and was rich and respected. Interestingly enough, Odin, a male god, is considered to be the biggest sorcerer in the Scandinavian heathen world and scholars agree with the fact that Freya was the one who taught Odin the knowledge of magic. Although witchcraft implies a bigger degree of independence than the religious practices, it is the gods, especially Odin, who gave the gift of *seiðr* to humans. Thus Christianity was against magic and the missionaries considered witchcraft as being the devil's work. But although the Christian authorities were opposed to it, people still continued to practice it as we can see in the sagas. What probably made it difficult for the priests and bishops to banish *seiðr* is the fact that people had always believed in it, and there were even clergymen who did not deny the power of witchcraft. In order to decrease the number of witches, one of the Christian laws from the Gulathing stated that a woman accused of practicing *seiðr* by three different houses or farms should be killed by being boiled to death. And in case she was actually innocent, her soul would go to heaven. But if she is accused of this only by one house, then the accusation would not be taken into consideration, but seen as a false testimony. The Viken laws were less cruel when it came to witches due to the belief that it was not one's fault for being a witch. This law states that a person accused of witchcraft should not be killed, but exiled together with all his/her belongings<sup>31</sup>.

#### **Chapter I.14: Destiny and divine providence**

Another important element of *seiðr* is the belief in destiny. People thought that the only divinities that could control fate were the norns. They controlled not only the people's fate, but also the one of the gods. Thus, no matter how hard they tried to avoid Baldir's death, his destiny was to die so that Ragnarok could come, and the gods could not do anything about it. When it comes to the destiny of the people, it was believed that the norns usually came when

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 128-129

a child was born and shaped the fate of that child from his first moments of being alive. Most Christians, on the other hand, did not believe in fate, but in divine providence<sup>32</sup>; God was all-powerful and he controlled everything. There was no power over him. He ordered all the events in the world according to his own will. The idea that the gods' destiny was controlled by other powers was used as an argument against the heathen religion by the missionaries. Thus the clergy questioned the power of the heathen gods and argued that their God was truly almighty, omnipresent and had no beginning and no end because there was no one to rule over him.

### **Chapter I.15: Child exposure**

A common practice in the heathen world was for a father to abandon a new born in the forest, or simply outside the community<sup>33</sup>, if he believed that the child was not his or not worthy of his family, or if he simply did not accept that child. According to the heathen tradition, life starts only after the child is given a name, a certain number of days after birth. And as long as the father abandons the child before naming it, then this action is not considered a crime<sup>34</sup>. It is believed that while being given a name, it was usual to pour water on the head of the child. This could be considered similar to infant baptism, although it does not imply the Christian connotation of liberation from sin and from the Devil, nor any kind of cleansing symbolism. With the introduction of the Christian law, however, the practice of child exposure was not allowed anymore and was severely punished. According to the new laws set at Gulathing, anyone who abandoned their children in the old ways would be fined with three marks. The law also states that if one has an unwanted child, then they should take the new born to the church so that it can be baptized and raised by the clergy.

### **Chapter I.16: Slavery**

It was very common in pre-Christian Scandinavia that people owned slaves. *Siðr* was not against this practice. However, after the transition to Christianity, the people started liberating their slaves due to the fact that owning slaves was not accepted by the church which stated that all men are born free and they should remain this way<sup>35</sup>. Even though this practice was not appreciated, the church did not do anything against it until the reign of King Olav II Haraldsson. The third missionary king of Norway decided at Gula, in accordance with the church, that everyone who owned slaves should liberate one of them every year in the first

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 83

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 125

<sup>34</sup> Steinsland 1995: 18

<sup>35</sup> Paasche 1958: 124

Sunday during the legislative assembling. Apparently it was not considered problematic for the rich farmers to free their slaves. According to Paasche, after King Olav II Haraldsson implied this law, people actually started to free their slaves willingly and by the 1160's King Magnus removed the slave law because it was not relevant anymore, there were almost no slaves left at all. According to the sagas, slaves were not mentioned at all after 1180. Therefore it is believed that there were no more slaves at all after this year in Norway.

The law about the releasing the slaves can be also explained through an unreligious argument. According to Kåre Lunden the newly liberated people either became small farmers or served in the king's army. Either way, they had to pay taxes to the king and to the church. And if they became farmers, they additionally had to pay rent for the land, again, to the king and the church. Lunden argues that the authorities could not get anything from these people if they were still slaves and therefore it was in the king and the church's interest to free them<sup>36</sup>.

According to the Christian church, having slaves was immoral due to the fact that everyone is born free. From here we can draw the conclusion that the new religion was closely related to what was moral and what was not. Christianity, unlike the old *siðr*, is a dualistic religion, meaning that it consists of the battle between Good and Evil and people had to choose on which side they want to be<sup>37</sup>. Unlike the pre-Christian faith where everything spins around the world tree, Yggdrasil, the new belief revolves around this battle between Good and Evil, moral and immoral. This trait was completely new for the Norsemen. In the old faith there was no such battle, the gods were not all good and the giants, the enemies of the gods, were not all bad. The Christian God, on the other hand, is entirely good, while his enemy, Satan, is entirely evil and wants nothing but to deceive humanity.

### **Chapter I.17: Oral tradition and book religion**

Another important characteristic that differentiates the two beliefs is that Christianity is a book religion and does not accept variation, while *siðr* is open towards regional discrepancies<sup>38</sup>. The old faith's ideas were not written down and its traits were kept alive from generation to generation by being transmitted orally. At the same time, the pre-Christian belief allowed and encouraged people to make skaldic poetry about the gods and their deeds, and the skalds could add or remove information in order to make their stories more interesting. Since Christianity was not as tolerant to interpretation as the old religion, the only

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<sup>36</sup>Lunden 1996: 157

<sup>37</sup>Steinsland 1996: 24

<sup>38</sup>Steinsland 1995: 16-17

people allowed to explain or to illustrate its teachings were the highly educated priests and bishops.

### **Chapter I.18: Burial rituals**

Since the two beliefs were different one from another, it is to be expected that their burial rituals and their ways of looking at death were also different. According to *Ynglinga saga* 8, Odin established a law saying that all the dead people should be burned together with their belongings and afterwards the ashes should be thrown into the sea or buried. People were burned together with their most precious belongings due to the belief that in this way they will still possess those objects after dying. Therefore many objects such as tools, weapons, jewellery or any other items that were considered useful were burned together with the dead people so that they could enjoy them in Valhalla, Folkvann or Helheim. In addition, the saga mentions that important people should have a mound raised in their memory, while the dead warriors should have an erected stone to remind the living people of them. Also, before being burned, the dead would have to be laid down for seven days. This period of time was considered a transitional period and several rituals could be performed in order to make sure that the transition is successful and that the dead would not come back. As we know from *Eirik the Red's saga*, people that were dead but could come back to life were dangerous and in addition this act was unnatural. In the old *siðr* there is a belief saying that there is life after death even inside the mound where the ashes of the dead are buried and possibly put on a boat or in an underground chamber, presumably with other people and animals. The grave mounds are usually situated in a very visible spot. Two of the most important grave mounds that have been found are the one from Anindshög in Sweden and the one from Borre in Norway. Due to the fact that many times the dead people are buried together with a ship, we can conclude that in order to go where one had to go in the afterlife they also needed a means of transportation.

Unlike the heathen faith, Christianity makes a clear distinction between body and soul<sup>39</sup>. The old *siðr* does not set such a distinction of values. The new religion did not support the same ideas about death as the old one. For instance, the new faith claimed that the soul was immortal and that, after death, it could go either to Heaven or to Hell, depending on the deeds of the person while alive. Moreover, the dead should not be buried together with their goods anymore due to the belief that they will not need that objects where they will go in the afterlife. It was important for the individuals to try while being alive not to sin and to save

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 18



their souls so that they can experience an afterlife filled with joy and happiness. If they did not listen to or if they did not follow God's word transmitted to them through the priests' teachings, they would be bound to suffer eternally in Hell's anguish. Since Christianity's views on death and eternal soul were different from the heathen ways of perceiving death, the new religion came with a set of new rules and laws concerning death and the burial ritual. At the Moster legislative assembly it has been decided that the dead could no longer be buried in a mound close to the farm, but only in a consecrated ground such as a church yard. Gro Steinsland explains that a grave mound which was positioned close to a farm represented security as well as marking of status<sup>40</sup>. The kin was important in the heathen society, and that kin was formed not only by the living family members, but also by the dead ones. Therefore it is possible to determine that the cult of the ancestors was an essential element of the pre-Christian society. But the Christian law demanded that all the dead people should be buried in consecrated ground at the latest five days after their death occurred<sup>41</sup>. It is possible to assume that this new law was not popular among the newly converted Christians. Moreover the new law probably also gave people a feeling of uncertainty and fear. If the corpses were not allowed to be laid down for 7 days, than that could mean that it would be possible for them to return from the dead, and, as *Eirik the Red's saga* illustrates, that was a thing to be frightened about. In addition, due to this new law, people could feel distanced from their departed ancestors. Their relationship could no longer be the same if the dead had to be buried away from the farm. According to Gro Steinsland, it was difficult to give up the ancestor's cult. Another reason to believe that it was not easy to renounce the old burial customs is that the new Gulating law put maximum punishment, exile, to all who kept a dead body unburied for more than five days. Thus it is safe to believe that the king together with his bishop would not imply such a harsh punishment if the custom was not often practiced after the conversion to Christianity.

During the transition from the old *siðr* to Christianity there have been made both heathen and Christian graves. According to Magnus Rindal there are a few traits that can lead us to whether a grave is made in concordance with the old traditions or with the Christian demands. He states that a grave is heathen if it is a burned. An important trait of the Christian grave, on the other hand, is its longitudinal orientation towards East-West. It is possible to determine the type of graves also by looking at the objects that were buried together with a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>41</sup> Gulating law, ch. 23

dead person. According to Rindal there have been Christian graves in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Norway, although he is unsure whether this points to big religious changes or just to individual believers<sup>42</sup>.

### **Chapter I.19: Cult places**

A religious society needs a special or holy place in order to be able to perform the cult. In the case of the heathen faith there had been several types of cult places and they could be either permanent or temporary. The old *siðr* did not necessarily require a man-made structure. The cult place could also be a natural formation such as mountains, lakes or waterfalls. Some of these cult places that can still be recognized today are Helgafell, a holy mountain from Iceland, or Tissø, the lake of Tyr, from Denmark. In other cases it is possible that the rites took place at home or close to the farm. According to Olaf Olsen, as well as to other scholars, most rituals took place in a *hov*. He argues that the *hov* was actually a big living room inside a building such as a longhouse and it was used for cultic activity at different celebrations. But when there was no cultic activity, the *hov* was used for other, mundane things. Another type of heathen cultic place was the *hørg*, which was possibly a stone structure, as the poem *Hyndluljóð* 10 describes it. This term used with the meaning of sacred place can also be found in *Völuspá* 7, but here we do not get a description of it. Another possible type of heathen cult place was the *vé*. It is believed that Lilla Ullevi from Sweden, a little sacred place dedicated to the god Ull, was actually a *vé*.

In contrast with the old *siðr*, Christianity allowed the cultic activities to take place only in the sacred church. The oldest churches in Norway that we know about are considered to be built around the year 1000 or even earlier. Magnus Rindal argues that the archaeological research from Klemeskirke in Oslo leads to the conclusion that there had been a missionary church there and it is dated to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup>. Although this is considered to be the oldest churchyard known in Norway, Rindal, as well as other scholars such as Brit Solli, believes that the churchyards on Veøy in Romsdal might be even older.

### **Chapter I.20: Cult leaders**

The new religion brought with it a new way of categorizing things, namely in sacred and profane<sup>44</sup>. These terms were new in heathen Scandinavia. Before the conversion to

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<sup>42</sup>Rindal 1996: 14

<sup>43</sup>Idem

<sup>44</sup>Steinsland 1995: 15

Christianity this division seemed to be irrelevant. Due to this anyone could be leader of the cult. It is believed that in small communities such as the farms, the cult leader was either the householder or the housewife. Most scholars agree that the pre-Christian faith did not have a real priesthood. However, Gro Steinsland argues in her article *Hvordan ble hedendommen utfordret og påvirket av kristendommen?* that, according to some Icelandic sources, the highest religious position before the conversion to Christianity was called *goði* for men and *gyðja* for women. The *goði* could have not only religious, but also political and juridical power. Nevertheless the *gyðja* could not have political power. The term *goði* can be found on the Glavendrup stone from the Danish isle Funen. The runic inscription is dated to early 10<sup>th</sup> century and was erected in memory of an honourable *goði* named Alli the Pale. Since the rune stone is raised in the memory of a cult leader it may be pointed out that this cult leader was highly respected in society. *Landnámabók* IV, ch.6 also mentions a man named Thorhadd who was a *hofgoði* at Mære in Trondheim. Especially since he could have also political and juridical power, the *goði* could also be a chieftain, earl or king. Because of this, it can be assumed that the king or ruler had to be present and to participate actively in the *blót* or sacrificial offering. This would not only give the people confidence that the gods will listen to their wish and bring luck, peace and prosperity to their lands, but it would also show that the ruler takes his role as leader of the cult seriously. The position of the king as cult leader must have been important and highly regarded by the people. According to some sources, a king could even be dethroned if he refused to perform the *blót*. Adam of Bremen gives such an example in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* Scholium 136. He states that King Anunder refused to sacrifice to the gods since he was a convinced Christian and was thus dismissed from his ruling position. In addition, *Haakon the Good's saga* 18 and 19 from *Heimskringla* also provides us with information about how important it was for the farmers to see that their king was also present at the sacrifices. When the king refused to sacrifice, the people got angry and threatened him violently. Nonetheless Earl Sigurd managed to make peace between the farmers and the king by convincing him to participate in the *blót*. The main reason why King Haakon the Good was not able to fight back was probably that the heathen chieftains that were present at the festivity had more military power than him.

After the transition to Christianity, the king, earl or chieftain could not have cultic power anymore. Due to the new division between sacred and profane only the specialists could be cult leaders. These specialists were the priests and the bishops only. However, the ruler could

still have some status in the religious cult, but only as long as he allowed the building of a church on his own farm<sup>45</sup>. But not even this could give him the privilege to be a cult leader, nor to designate priests. The ones who were responsible for naming priests were just the bishops.

### **Chapter I.21: The blót**

The *blót*, or sacrificial offering, was often performed during the heathen celebrations such as the solstices and equinoxes. The offerings were symbolically given to the gods and goddesses so that they would give the people in return peace, prosperity and fertility to their lands. It is important to notice that these were not the only things that people asked for from the gods, but they were probably the most common. One of the most frequent animals to be sacrificed was the horse, but sheep or cows were also used. Some of the sources that stand as testimony for this are *Víga-Glúms Saga* 9 and *Haakon the Good's saga* 16, 18 and 19. The Blekinge rune stone from Sweden also tells about sacrificial offerings performed in order to have a fruitful year. According to the sagas, the heathens also performed human sacrifices if nothing else worked, if their lands were poor and fruitless, or if they could not otherwise be victorious in important battles. Such examples can be found in *Ynglinga saga* 18 and *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* 21. However, scholars such as Fredrik Paasche believe that human sacrifices were very rarely performed<sup>46</sup>.

Most commonly, the *blót* represented an occasion for the people to gather together and feast. Consequently, it had a meaningful social function<sup>47</sup>. Since it was important for the people to gather together at feasts, the Christian authorities probably had to leave this tradition alive by converting its heathen meaning into a Christian one, namely the celebration of the saints. For the same purpose, it is believed that some Christian churches were even placed on the old heathen sacred places or overtook the old religion's buildings. An example of this kind of cult continuity can possibly be found at Mære in Nord-Trøndelag, Norway. Many scholars, including Olaf Olsen, assume that the medieval church from this village was placed on the old heathen *hov*.

Since the sacrifice was important for the farmers in bringing fertility to their lands, it was probably difficult not to perform them anymore after the introduction of the Christian law. Moreover, people might have feared that without performing the *blót* their lands would suffer

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 16

<sup>46</sup> Paasche 1958: 122

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 96

from being unproductive and fruitless. According to the letter that bishop Daniel of Winchester sent to Bonifatius in 723/24, the missionaries found a possible solution to combat against the heathen practice: they would tell the farmers that the Christian countries, unlike the heathen Scandinavia, are fertile and produce many goods. Thus they would conclude that as long as they believe in the one true all-powerful God, they would not need to perform sacrifices anymore because the new God will provide their lands with richness.

### **Chapter I.22: Missionaries**

The role of the missionaries was crucial in the conversion to Christianity. Surely the king could force his people to get baptized, to follow the Christian law and to give up the old tradition, but that would not necessarily mean that the people would actually change their real faith. In order for the farmers to truly give up their old beliefs and embrace the new religion, the missionary work was essential. In order to become a missionary, one must have had a lot of faith in Christianity and must have been also courageous<sup>48</sup>; during the transitional period many missionary priests were violently threatened by heathens and as some sources such as *Haakon the Good's saga* affirm, even killed. At the same time, as Paasche suggests in *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i norden*, they could have felt threatened also by the heathen gods who were believed to be devils by the Christians.

Conforming to bishop Daniel of Winchester's letter to Bonifatius, a good missionary must be cunning, calm and perseverant, and should not upset or offend the heathens especially due to the aforementioned reason. In order for Christianity to win popularity among the heathens, the missionary priests should also question the power of the old gods. For instance, they should ask how come the gods need sacrifices if they are all-powerful. After all, all their power would allow them to take what they need without human help. In this letter the bishop states that a missionary should also question the gods' means of reproduction. Since they are created in the same way as humans and other creatures, it means they have a beginning and an ending. In contrast to the heathen gods, the Christian one has no beginning and no ending and therefore is more powerful. The missionaries should also try to defend Christianity by stating that this religion is more prestigious around the world compared to the heathen one and thus Christianity must be a better religion. Additionally, bishop Daniel of Winchester advises the missionary priests to approach the heathens first by presenting the similarities between heathendom and Christianity.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.130

### Chapter I.23: Christianity and the law

It is reasonable to believe that Christianity would not have had such a big influence on the heathen farmers if it weren't for the fact that the laws of the new religion also became the laws of the entire country. This happened most likely during the reign of King Olav II Haraldsson. Some scholars believe that the Christian law became the law of the country in the year 1022 at Moster, and it was implied by the third missionary king of Norway and bishop Grimkell. The reason why scholars can date this important event so exactly is due to the Kuli rune stone. This inscription tells us about the fact that for 'twelve winters Christianity had been in Norway'. According to Terje Spurkland's book *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions* this essential rune stone is dated by most experts to the year 1034. Therefore, if the inscription refers to the Moster assembly and if the stone was actually carved in 1034, we can conclude that the Christian law was established in Norway in the year 1022<sup>49</sup>. However, some scholars such as Gro Steinsland state that it is more likely for the rune stone to have been carved in 1036 and thus the Christian law to have been implied in the year 1024. Thus, either the year 1022 or 1024 is crucial for the introduction of the Christian law in Norway.

According to the new law, the only religion that was permitted in the country was Christianity. Consequently all the heathen rites and customs were forbidden. The Norwegians were no longer allowed to bury their family members close to the farm, but only in consecrated ground such as a churchyard, where they got their grave places according to their social rank. According to the Eidsivatingslövi, men had to be buried south to the church, while women north to the church<sup>50</sup>. This was probably harsh since before the new law was put into practice people from the same family were buried in the same place or close to each other. Another thing that represented a big part of the heathen culture and that was forbidden by the new law was setting the unwanted new-born children out to perish. The Christian law also forbids a man to marry more than one woman, as well as to marry someone from his own kin. One could only marry another if the kinship degree between them was higher than the seventh. Besides, the married couple was not allowed to conjugate on the nights before Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the nights before fast days and holy days, during the fast days, the Christmas and the Easter days. In contrast, during the pre-Christian times, sexuality was an open matter, especially since the god Frey and the goddess Freya were symbols not

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<sup>49</sup>Spurkland 2005: 111

<sup>50</sup>Rindal 1996: 18

only for fertility, but also for eroticism. According to Gro Steinsland both men's and women's sexuality was valued before the conversion to Christianity<sup>51</sup>.

Another important Christian law refers to the prohibition of eating meat. People were not allowed to consume this aliment on Fridays and during fasting periods anymore. This was new to the Norsemen since before the transition to Christianity there were no eating constraints. In addition, the eating of horse meat was strictly prohibited during the entire year. The act of eating horse meat was especially considered sinful probably due to the fact that this particular animal represented a common type of offering during the *blót*, as it probably represented fertility. And since all other religions except for Christianity were forbidden, the *blót* was also prohibited. Considering the fact that witchcraft was an essential feature of the old faith, the new Christian law also banned the act of performing magic and divination. According to the Moster laws, the farmers were no longer allowed to mistreat the priests. Moreover, they had to entertain the clergy men, as well as to go to the Christian masses and to celebrate the holy days.

If people broke the Christian law, they had to be punished. According to the Gulathing law this punishment usually consisted of paying some fines such as three marks to the king and the bishop. But if the crimes were considered to be very severe, they were punished by losing their freedom as well as everything they owned. The maximum penalty is considered to be exiling the law breaker and was put into practice against someone who committed one or more of the following crimes: not brewing ale three years in a row on Christmas in order to celebrate Virgin Mary and the birth of Christ (chapter 7); not holding the entire fast several times (Ch. 20); not baptizing a new born child for more than 12 months (Ch. 21); having a dead person in the house for more than five days (Ch. 23); marrying a relative from a lower than the seventh degree of kinship (Ch. 24); practicing polygamy (Ch. 25); practicing divination or witchcraft (Ch. 28), as well as making sacrificial offerings (Ch. 29). The maximum punishment was given to those who did not practice Christianity correctly or who practiced the heathen customs. Therefore it is safe to believe that some people still practiced the old traditions even after the transition to the new religion, otherwise these laws would have not been created or the punishment for breaking these rules would have not been so severe. These new laws must have had a big impact and a big influence on people's daily lives. Their entire tradition had been changed into something completely new. Magnus Rindal

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<sup>51</sup>Steinsland 1995: 19

thus states that the new Christian laws were probably not practiced very strictly in the beginning. He defends his statement by giving Iceland as an example. In Iceland people freely accepted Christianity as the only religion of the state as long as they could still eat horse meat, send away the unwanted children and practice the *blót* in secrecy. He believes that these actions were probably not punished so rigidly right before the introduction of the Christian law in Norway<sup>52</sup>. Due to this, we can conclude that the Norse people were not pleased with all the new laws in the beginning and that they needed some time to adjust to the new religion.

The entire human life is influenced and covered by the Christian law. From birth, one must be baptized. Afterwards one must fast, not eat horse meat, go to church and celebrate the Christian holydays while giving up the old customs. And when the time comes to get married, the new law, again, would have a big influence on who one can and cannot marry and even on when the couple is allowed to copulate and when not. Moreover the Christian law influenced the people also after their death, since they could only be buried in accordance with the new religion.

#### **Chapter I.24: Heathendom in the 10<sup>th</sup> century**

Some scholars, among whom also Erik Gunnes, believe it would have been impossible for Christianity to take over if the old customs were not already dying in Scandinavia. According to Gro Steinsland they believe that since the two faiths are so different one from another, Christianity could have only replaced the old *siðr* if heathendom had already become unpopular. Scholars such as E. S. Engelstad and Andreas Holmsen also believe that one reason why *siðr* became undesirable is because, since people travelled a lot abroad in Christian countries, they found out early that, unlike Christianity, the old faith was ridiculous and could not satisfy their intellect anymore<sup>53</sup>. Another piece of evidence in favour of this theory is the fact that some written sources talk about people in the Viking Age who were *goðlauss*, or godless, people that did not believe in anything but their own powers, atheists. This is seen by some scholars as a clue to support the hypothesis that the old faith was weak. However, this term may also simply nominate only a few people, people who were usually outlaws and who were exiled. The exiled people could no longer play an active role in the

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<sup>52</sup>Rindal 1996: 18-19

<sup>53</sup>Steinsland 1990/2: 124-25



religious cult. They were forsaken by their old gods and had no one else to appeal to but their own strength and powers<sup>54</sup>, they were *goðlauss*.

In contrast with these scholars, Gro Steinsland, Haakon Shetelig and other experts believe that heathendom was a living religion by the time of the conversion to Christianity and that most people were heathens by the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. I believe their theory is more reliable than the previously mentioned one. According to Steinsland even the concept 'change of religion' connotes that by the time of the Christianization the old faith was not dead, but coexisted with Christianity<sup>55</sup>. Moreover, the missionary kings of Norway wouldn't have had so many opponents from a religious point of view if the old faith was dying. In addition sources such as several sagas and skaldic poems mention that Earl Haakon, the ruler of Norway between around 970 and 995, was a convinced heathen and so were many of his followers. If the old religion was dying, then it is unlikely that the ruler of Norway would be a heathen. Another argument is that in Iceland the eating of horse meat, the child exposure and the secret sacrifices were still allowed even after the conversion. This can only lead to the conclusion that the old religion was still powerful by the time of the conversion. There are more good arguments in favour of the hypothesis that heathendom was still alive and powerful during the conversion to Christianity than in favour of the idea that the old religion was dying by the time of the transition. This suggests that it was probably not easy to eliminate the old faith in favour of a completely new religion.

### **Chapter I.25: Conclusions**

Since it is more likely to believe that heathendom was a living religion in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to conclude that Christianity must have had an enormous impact on the everyday life of the Norwegian farmers. The new religion came with a totally different approach on life and afterlife. Christianity changed the way people thought about lineage. Since the old religion was oriented towards kinship, it must have been difficult to adopt a religion that, in contrast, is oriented towards the individual, a religion in which the kin does not play such an important role. Another difference between the two beliefs is their perception of women. Since in the old times the woman had a rather good status, it is likely to believe that the women farmers were not satisfied with their new inferior role offered to them after the conversion. The comparison made in this chapter offers the possibility to see whether or not it was difficult to give up the old faith. And considering the laws and what crimes had the

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<sup>54</sup>Steinsland 1995: 10

<sup>55</sup>Steinsland 1990/2: 123

maximum punishment, it is reasonable to believe that for many Norwegian farmers it must have been burdensome to renounce some of the old customs. Probably the most difficult traditions to give up were the *blót*, exposing unwanted children and eating horse meat. Therefore these things could not be implied to the Icelandic people and it was probably not easy for the Norwegians to accept them either. Other customs that were much impregnated into the farmers' lives and could hardly be removed by Christianity were the burying rituals, divination and witchcraft. The new laws also suggest that some Christian customs were not appealing to the farmers. These customs are fasting, the brewing of ale in honour of Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ or baptizing the new born.

The new religion brought with it new terms, new perceptions. Before Christianity the heathens would not make a distinction between body and soul, profane and sacral. Moreover, the duality of the new belief was new and concepts such as sin, eternity or salvation were unfamiliar. Another unknown trait that characterizes the new religion is its universality, the fact that it should not have regional variations and that only the experts were allowed to interpret it and to explain it to the rest of the people. Furthermore, the idea of a specialist cult leader was new, considering the fact that the heathen rituals could be performed by anyone from a housewife to the king. Since Christianity came with many new and contrasting traits, it is worth believing that the transition was not an easy process for the Norwegian farmers and that it must have taken a long time for the old *siðr* to perish and for the new one to completely take its place. Many scholars tend to agree that the transitional process began around the year 800 and ended sometime during the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the impact of Christianity over the farmers must have been of huge proportions.

Since heathendom was a polytheistic faith, it was probably not so difficult for the people to include another god in their pandemonium. However, it must have been tough to abandon all the old gods in favour of just one single God. In order to make this process easier, they probably needed to have a strong belief also in saints and angels so that the transition from a polytheism to monotheism to be more approachable. The missionaries had an important role in converting the farmers to Christianity. Not only that they explained the new religion to the people, but they were also very smart, cunning and good at manipulating people into changing their beliefs, as the letter sent by bishop Daniel of Winchester to Bonifatius illustrates. Probably one of the most successful methods of introducing the heathens to Christianity was for the missionaries to exhibit the few, but crucial similarities between the two religions and to present the advantages that Christianity has in opposition to the old faith.

Another method that seems to have worked well was to show them how weak the old gods and goddesses were in comparison to the Almighty God, as seen through the eyes of the Christian clergymen. However, the missionaries were not always successful, as the sagas depict, and many of them had a tragic end. Consequently heathendom was powerful during the 10<sup>th</sup> century and many people found the Christian preaching as offensive towards their faith and just the missionary work was not strong enough in order to convert the heathen farmers. Thus the missionary kings also played an important role in the Christianization of Norway. Only they could have the necessary authority to make the heathens listen to the priests without hurting them, only they could make the people follow the Christian law. However, as the sagas portray, the first missionary king, Haakon the Good, was not very successful at converting his people mainly because he did not dispose of an army powerful enough to defeat his opposition. The missionary priests probably couldn't have been successful without the help of the kings. Nonetheless, the kings alone could demand people to follow the Christian laws and to receive baptism, but they could not force the farmers who did not want to convert to actually change their own thoughts about faith. In order for the heathen farmers to change their beliefs, to actually abandon the old *siðr*, both the king and the missionaries had to work together. However it is possible that not everyone was against the change of faith.

## Chapter II: Early Christian influence in Norway

### Chapter II.1: Introduction

The Norsemen came in contact for the first time with Christianity not on Norwegian soil, but far from home, in their travels to either south or west, where they either plundered and raided the Christian territories or became mercenaries or soldiers for the Christian aristocracy. Else Roesdahl argues in her book *Viking og Hvidekrist. Norden og Europa 800-1200* that before the Viking plundering of Lindisfarne, England in 793, the contact between the Norsemen and the Christian lands was rare mainly due to the fact that the sailing ships from before the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century were not developed enough. However, after the invention of better means of transportation such as the long ships, around the year 800, the travelling was made easier and thus, the contact with Christianity formed roots.

Although this theory is supported by many theoreticians, more and more scholars nowadays tend to disagree with it and to suggest that the people from the west coast of Norway started travelling to England and Scotland long before the plundering of the Lindisfarne monastery. John Hines argues that, according to archaeological sources, Norway and England had been in contact even by the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>56</sup>. Several scholars such as Brit Solli, Bjørn Myhre, Ole Crumlin-Pedersen and Birthe Weber agree with Hines and state that the contact between the Norsemen and the British Isles began earlier than the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, they argue that the older sailing ships were also able to travel through the North Sea. Brit Solli concludes in the article *Narratives of Encountering Religions: On the Christianization of the Norse around AD 900-1000* that it is more likely to believe that the Norwegians were in peaceful contact with the British Isles before the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but that after around 793 this relationship became hostile, than to believe that the first contacts between the two people started around the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and were aggressive. Her conclusion is helpful in supporting the idea that the process of Christianization took a long period of time, namely from the first contacts with the lands outside Scandinavia, until the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This theory promotes the idea that the transition from the old *siðr* to Christianity was a long process, and thus, that the old religion was not weak or dying during the religious transition. This adds to the arguments from the first chapter in favour of the fact that the heathen religion was alive and still strong by the time of the conversion.

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<sup>56</sup>Hines 1993a: 121

Dagfinn Skre suggests a clear distinction between Christianization and conversion to Christianity and I believe that presenting his idea could be useful since it is easy to confuse or to mix the two terms. In the article *Missionary Activity in Early Norway*, Skre describes the process of Christianization as being a long one, beginning with the earliest contacts with the new religion and ending probably around the end of the 11<sup>th</sup>. The conversion to Christianity, on the other hand, took place during a shorter time span and is included in the Christianization. It started when larger groups of people in Norway adopted the new religion, probably during the reign of King Haakon the Good, had its peak by the time any other religion than Christianity was forbidden by law, and ended probably sometime during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>57</sup>.

Although Christianity seems to have begun its influence on the Norsemen at an early stage, it is safe to believe that the people did not adopt the new religion during the first steps of Christianization, but that the new religion's influence was visible in the practicing and development of heathendom. The new religion's influence led to, for instance, the old one becoming more related and more connected to the aristocracy than before<sup>58</sup>.

The process of Christianization was not homogenous or continuous<sup>59</sup>. The archaeological material shows us that the first Christian influence began earlier in some regions such as the West and the South coasts of Norway, while in other places it started later. The reason why Christianity arose earlier in these areas is because the people living there travelled more overseas and thus, got in contact with Christians earlier than the other Norsemen. It is also believed that during the beginning of the Christianizing process the new religion's influence was weaker, while by the time of the conversion the influence reached its strongest points.

## **Chapter II.2: Missionary work in Norway**

During the Christianization of Norway, an important role was played by the missionary clergymen. However, they probably did not start their work here by the time of the beginning of the processes, the first missionaries coming to Norway in the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>60</sup>. Their work during the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries was not as substantial<sup>61</sup> as it was during and after the reign of Olav Haraldsson. In the early stage of missionary work, the priests and other clergymen wanted to convert the people who were situated higher in the social hierarchy such

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<sup>57</sup>Skre 1997: 3-4

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 3

<sup>59</sup>Idem

<sup>60</sup>Hærnes 1995: 88

<sup>61</sup>Steinsland 1990/2: 128

as powerful chieftains, kings or noblemen. They believed, and were probably right to a large extent, that once they managed to convert the leading figures in society, then they could more easily convert also the ordinary people under them, such as the farmers, because they would simply follow their rulers<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore, only after having the approval and the support of the chieftains, the clergymen could begin to preach to the masses, as well as to found the first step toward the organized Church in Norway.

One of the most popular tactics used by the missionaries to convert the heathens was to present the Christian God in comparison to the old gods, but to make him look more powerful, stronger, kinder, in other words, better from any point of view than the old gods and to show the masses that the new belief is better and superior in contrast to the old one. To do so, they had to convince the heathens that Christians were more prosperous and their lands were more fertile than the Norwegian ones<sup>63</sup>.

According to Dagfinn Skre, the missionary work in Norway is divided into two distinct stages. During the first phase it is believed that the missionaries were courageous and daring due to the fact that they were the first clergymen to try to preach in Norway, and although they probably expected some people to have aggressive reactions towards them, as well as not many supporters, they were still brave enough to try to religiously conquer the Norwegians. An example of such a fearless missionary is the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen Ansgar who preached Christianity for six months at Birka, Sweden in the year 829. In Norway several sagas give evidence that King Haakon the Good brought such missionaries with him from England during his reign between around 934 and 961. But since Haakon the Good was often not as politically and military strong and as influential as some of the heathen chieftains and earls, his efforts of converting his country were not always successful. Thus, during this period of time the missionaries were not only risking being ineffective, but they also risked their own lives, as many sagas describe, in order to try to convert heathens<sup>64</sup>. The second phase of the missionary work takes place from the beginning of the reign of Olav Tryggvason until the end of the reign of Olav Haraldsson. These two Christian kings implemented laws that forbade the mistreating of the clergymen, as well as the belief in any other religion except the Christian one. During this period of time the missionaries did not need to be as courageous as during the first stage since they were under the protection of the

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<sup>62</sup>Idem, Skre 1997: 4

<sup>63</sup>Skre 1997: 5-6

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 7

most powerful men in the country. Also, by this time some of them probably had their own small body or armed men to defend them<sup>65</sup>.

The first missionaries that we know about who came to Norway are the ones brought by King Haakon the Good from the British Isles. Nonetheless, as several sagas such as *Heimskringla's Haakon the Good Saga*, *Olav Tryggvason's Saga* or *St. Olav's Saga* and *Soga om Olav Tryggvason. Etter Odd munk Snorresson* describe, several of these missionaries were badly treated or sometimes even killed by the heathens. The churches built during the reign of the first missionary king were burned down after his death and the priests were killed. Thus, although there probably were some groups of people who converted to the new religion during this time, Haakon the Good's work cannot be considered very successful, or at least not as successful as the work done by the next two missionary kings of Norway. *Soga om Olav Tryggvason. Etter Odd munk Snorresson* also mentions that the German Emperor Otto II sent two missionary earls to Norway, particularly to the area between Viken and Lindesnes in the 970's. As stated in *Soga om Olav Tryggvason. Etter Odd munk Snorresson* as well as in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* it is possible that around the year 996 several Irish missionaries came to Norway, namely to Selja. Among them was also a Christian princess named Sunniva. They had to hide in a rock cave in order to escape the wrath of the heathens and died there, as the entrance to the cave got blocked. After this Sunniva became the first saint of Norway. Nonetheless, scholars cannot be sure on whether this is a real story or if it represents no more than a provincial adaptation of a similar Irish legend<sup>66</sup>. Although most scholars agree that there must have been missionary work in Norway also earlier than the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there are no sources available to confirm this statement. However, I do agree with most scholars' conclusion, namely that the missionaries must have come to this Scandinavian country also earlier than what the sources describe, especially due to the fact that Sweden and Denmark do have documented proof that there were missionaries in these countries earlier than the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Norway's case must be similar to that of Sweden and Denmark, with the difference that the evidence in Norway cannot at least yet be documented.

Dagfinn Skre mentions in his article *Missionary Activity in Early Norway* that there is, however, some additional evidence of missionary work in Norway during the last half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Three bishops from Ribe, Denmark sent several missionary clergymen to the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 7

South-East coast of Norway during this period of time. The Danish king who made his country Christian, Harald Bluetooth, sent missionaries in the Viken area, namely in the same area where Emperor Otto II of Germany sent his earls. The sources that stand testimony for this matter are *Soga om Olav Tryggvason*, *Etter Odd munk Snorresson* and Snorri Sturlason's *Heimskringla*.

Without a doubt the missionary work played an important role in the Christianization of the heathen Norsemen. However, we do not have many written sources about their deeds, nor about how successful they were at accomplishing their mission or about the length of their work. Furthermore, the sources that do inform us about the early missionary work in Norway were written down several centuries after the events took place, making them rather unreliable. In order to find out more about the effects of the missionary work in Norway, we should look not only at the written sources, but also at the archaeological material, the runic inscriptions, the stone crosses, the churches and anything else that can say something relevant about this matter.

### **Chapter II.3: Stone crosses**

One of the types of historical evidence that can say more about the early traces of Christianity on Norwegian soil is represented by the stone crosses. This type of erected crosses usually made of stone first appeared in Ireland and Britain. Scholars believe that the stone crosses erected in Norway represent a direct Christian influence from the British Islands. One of the roles attributed to some of these crosses was to consecrate heathen burial grounds. The Christian priests would only bury the dead in consecrated ground. Since in the beginning of the conversion there were no consecrated graveyards, they had to erect stone crosses in order to sanctify the ground and be able to bury the dead in the Christian way. The Christian law implied that the dead people had to be buried exclusively in consecrated ground probably also in order for them to have a chance at going to Heaven. In the old religion the cult of the ancestors was very strong, the dead members of the family were as important as the living ones. People about to convert, or the newly converted Christians might have been hesitant towards the new religion after they became aware that their ancestors did not have the possibility to get to know the new faith and thus to receive baptism. Consequently, they probably feared that the new religion would send their unbaptized ancestors to Hell. In order for the missionaries to please the people, they decided, among other things, to erect stone crosses on heathen graveyards in order to consecrate the ground so that the dead Norsemen could have a chance at saving their souls. Besides this method they probably also used to



preach about Christ's *Harrowing of Hell* as told in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. In this part of the gospel it is reported that, during the time after his crucifixion and before his resurrection, Christ the Triumphant descended into Hell in order to save the souls of all the people who did not get the chance to receive Christian baptism due to their lack of knowledge about it, but who were good during their lifetime. It is believed that missionaries often preached this gospel to the new Christians who were worried that their dead relatives could not get the chance at eternal salvation.

In Norway there have been found around 60 stone crosses, from which many were erected on heathen burial grounds. Probably the most ambiguous thing concerning the stone crosses in Norway is dating them. In the case of most erected crosses scholars were only able to make educated guesses and presumptions when it came to determining their age. Nonetheless, it is possible that about half of them were most likely erected during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, while the other half were older, some of them probably even as old as the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>67</sup>.

Fridtjov Birkeli wrote in 1973 a rather thorough book about stone crosses in Norway called *Norske steinkors i tidlig middelalder. Et bidrag til belysning av overgangen fra norrøn religion til kristendom*. Here he gives a presentation of several erected stones that are either shaped as crosses or have a cross marked on them, but he also tries to find details about them that may lead to their more precise dating. However, in many cases he is forced, as other scholars, to simply give academic guesses about this matter since it is impossible nowadays to come to better results. Birkeli states that some of the oldest stone crosses in Norway can possibly be dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. However, other scholars such as Sophus Bugge, James Knirk or Aslak Liestøl do not always agree with his dating.

It is argued that not all stone crosses are erected due to religious purposes. Maybe the ones that are positioned on the coast lines to be very visible from the sea might have had a role in guiding the sailors to the land. But even if the purpose of some of the raised crosses was different than the religious one, it is still safe to believe that the habit of erecting stone crosses represents a direct Christian influence from the British Isles.

Dagfinn Skre seems to be very optimistic in believing that some stone crosses were erected in Norway as early as the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. He suggests that this might be a reason to argue in

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 9

favour of missionary work on the Western coastline during this period of time. Moreover, he believes that these missionaries were brought to Norway by the travelling Norwegians who converted to Christianity abroad and who wanted to spread the words of Christ also in their homelands, to their communities<sup>68</sup>.

#### **Chapter II.4: Graves**

Probably one of the most important sources that testify to the Christian influence on Norwegian soil is represented by the graves. In the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century the number of heathen graves on the South-Eastern coast of Norway is decreasing severely. In regions such as Agder, Vestfold or Østfold it is believed that, during this period of time, more and more people were buried according to the Christian custom. Furthermore, also in western regions such as Rogaland and Sunnmøre the number of Christian graves is rapidly increasing around the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Also on the North-Western part of Norway there is evidence that there were more and more Norsemen converting to the new religion. Recently, in this region of Norway, namely at Veøy, there has been discovered a Christian graveyard that can be dated to the beginning or the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>69</sup>.

There are some clues that can help us determine whether a grave is heathen or Christian. For instance, if it is burned, it indicates that the grave is a heathen one. If it is East-West oriented or if it does not include many or any grave gifts at all, it might be a Christian grave. Grave mounds suggest heathen burial practices. However, during the transitional period it is possible that the old burial customs were influenced by the Christian ones. Thus, not all heathen graves from this period were necessarily in mounds. Also, a sign of Christian influence on graves may be the fact that, during the transition, many mounds were made smaller and more insignificant than before. Consequently during the time of the conversion it was possible to make grave mounds for Christians, as well as flat graves for the heathens. The traditions could be mingled during this time. Another way to tell that a grave is Christian is if it is positioned on consecrated ground such as a churchyard. However, the churchyards probably appeared in Norway during the last stages of the conversion to the new religion, towards the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and do not give us much information about the first Christian graves or influences on the old burial customs. The oldest churchyard found in Norway is the one from the St. Clement's Church in Oslo and it can be dated to around the second half of the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 10

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 9

10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>70</sup>. However, new excavations may lead to the belief that the churchyards from Veøy could be older than the one from Oslo<sup>71</sup>.

Some other clues that can lead to the conclusion that a grave was either Christian or suffered Christian influence is represented by the objects found in the graves. If there can be found crosses or cross figures, clear quartz and/or wax candles, then it is very probable that the grave is Christian or influenced by the new religion. The clear quartz can be considered a sign of Christianity because it was used on the continent as a popular baptismal gift because it symbolizes the purity of the ritual. Scholars believe that the clear quartz was also used in Scandinavia in Christian contexts. The wax candles appear in Christian graves that belong to people of the higher social classes from the end of the Iron Age. The reason why people were buried together with wax candles is probably because it was, and in some places still is, believed to keep witchcraft and demonized entities away<sup>72</sup>.

Among the early graves with very few gifts in them as a possible sign for Christian influence are the ones found at Årstad. The grave chamber found in 1918 consisted of three women's graves, presumably not cremated. The only tools found here were two bowl-like buckles and one trefoil buckle. Due to the style of these three items the graves can be dated to around the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Hærnes believes it is peculiar that the grave does not have more goods in it, especially since, in his opinion, the theory saying that the women were poor cannot be sustained here due to the fact that the jewellery finds connected to the graves indicate otherwise<sup>73</sup>. Thus it is believed that the lack of tools in the grave chamber could be an indication of Christian influence. Another grave that might have been influenced by the Christian burial customs is the one found at Erøy. This grave belonged to a man and consisted of several grave goods such as battle tools and other objects. Some of the items such as the sword help in dating the grave to the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>74</sup>. This grave was probably influenced by the new religion due to the fact that it was not found in a burial mound, but under flat ground, as the Christian graves were normally buried.

Possibly the biggest clue that can lead to concluding that a grave was Christian or was influenced by the new religion is if there can be found Christian objects in graves. In the region of Rogaland in Norway there are several graves that consist of such items. Among

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<sup>70</sup> Hærnes 1995: 89-91

<sup>71</sup> Rindal 1996: 14

<sup>72</sup> Hærnes 1995: 92

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 94-95

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 99

them is the one from Frøyland in which there were found four antiquities that either had the form of a cross, or had crosses as ornamentation. This grave can be dated to as early as around the year 800<sup>75</sup>. Other Norwegian graves that may have been Christian or at least influenced by Christianity can be found in Litlaland (dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century), Sola (10<sup>th</sup> century), Revheim (first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century), Heigraberg (first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century), or Håvastein (9<sup>th</sup> century).

According to Per Hærnes there have been found 39 items that can lead to Christian influence in Rogaland during the Viking Age, from which 25 were found in relation to graves. Nonetheless the Christian items found in the graves do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the ones buried were Christian or were having an affinity for the new religion. These objects can also be put inside the graves due to the will of the living family members who probably were more or less Christian and who wanted, with these objects, to offer protection to the dead's soul, even if the dead ones did not get the chance to embrace Christianity while still being alive<sup>76</sup>. However, these grave finds do show us that the new faith was known in this region of Norway during the beginning of the Viking Age.

By analysing all the graves found in the Rogaland region that can have suffered Christian influence, Hærnes came to the conclusion that the oldest graves affected by the new belief are the one from Frøyland and the one from Klungtveit. Both of them are supposed to be dated to the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. However, the ship graves from Karmøy, namely Grønhaug and Storhaug are probably not much younger either<sup>77</sup>. All these graves that were influenced by the new religion show us that some groups of people from Rogaland either had become Christian or assimilated some Christian ideas and customs during the beginning of the Viking Age. Thus we can conclude that it is possible that there were missionaries in Rogaland during this period of time that were holding masses and preaching Christ's words. Nonetheless, there have been found also many heathen graves during the Viking Age in the same areas where there have been found presumably Christian ones, suggesting that the old *siðr* was still alive during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and that it coexisted with Christianity.

## **Chapter II.5: Churches**

The oldest churches can also help us determine how early Christianity started its work in Norway. The sagas tell us that King Haakon the Good wanted to convert his people to the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 102

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 111

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 113

new religion, and thus he brought with him missionaries from the British Isles and built churches in Norway. However, after his death, the heathen chieftains are said to have destroyed all these sacred buildings as well as to have killed the priests and other clergymen. Consequently, Haakon the Good's wish to make his country Christian did not prevail, even though it is thought that there were some groups of people that adopted his religion under his reign.

It is believed that the earliest organized Church in Norway consisted of clergymen that were doing missionary work and were following the king or his allies, under his protection. In its earliest form, the Church did not have consolidated buildings and, as also Adam of Bremen points out, even in the 1070's there were still bishops and priests who were travelling around the country. A reason for the missionaries to first want to convert the higher strata of the society was to obtain from them not only the approval, but also the material support to build churches. After they managed to convert groups of people, the clergymen settled around the converted areas where they managed, with the help of the now Christian chieftains, powerful farmers or other aristocrats, to set up their own buildings. Having these centres, it was easier for them to travel and preach<sup>78</sup>. These buildings are called *hovedkirker*, or 'main churches', and were probably built around the 10<sup>th</sup> century or in the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

In accordance with Dagfinn Skre, four such *hovedkirker* were built in Romerike. He examines two of these churches, the one at Eid and the one from Sørum and concludes that the church from Eid was built probably with the king's permission, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The church from Sørum, however, was built under the authority of the local aristocracy, namely of a magnate, during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. But these two churches are not the oldest ones that we know about in Norway. Probably the oldest church found on Norwegian soil is in Oslo and it is called St. Clement's Church. Due to the archaeological research done on the graves surrounding this building, the church can be dated to around the year 1000 or even earlier<sup>79</sup>.

Nonetheless, many scholars, one of the most representative being Brit Solli, believe it is possible that the first church from Veøy to be even older than the St. Clement's Church. The graves from Veøy were not cremated and were positioned in the typical Christian way, which is east-west. Moreover, the dead bodies were placed either on wooden boards or inside

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<sup>78</sup>Skre 1997: 13-14

<sup>79</sup>Rindal 1996: 14

wooden coffins and there were found no grave gifts, except for one item in a single grave<sup>80</sup>. All these signs indicate Christian burials. Close to the church built in around the year 1200 at Veøy there can be find the ruins of two other buildings that presumably comprised two churchyards. According to the radiocarbon dating, these churchyards, along with the two buildings that were most likely churches, were probably formed during the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier<sup>81</sup>. If this interpretation is correct, then it is possible to conclude that the Veøy churchyards are perhaps the oldest ones in Norway, if not in the entire Scandinavia, and could be dated to the period when Haakon the Good was king of Norway, between 934 and 961. However, Brit Solli determines that the region just south of Veøy, Horgheim, was heathen during this period of time. Consequently, this represents another reason to believe that Christianity and the old religion coexisted in the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>82</sup>.

In Norway there have been excavated the ruins of ten early stave churches. However, they were all built around the second part of the 11<sup>th</sup> century or even later than that. This can suggest that before this period there were not many churches and that the clergymen used to travel around the country in order to try to convert heathens to the new religion. It can also be concluded that there were not many Christians in Norway during the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Since more and more churches were built after the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century it may indicate that the majority of people were now converted, the missionary period had come to an end<sup>83</sup>, and therefore the Norsemen needed the services of the clergymen more often. Thus many priests had to settle down and regularly perform masses, baptism, funerals and other sacraments.

## **Chapter II.6: Crucifixes**

Although there is evidence that supports the idea that Christianity and the old customs coexisted during the transitional period, the earliest crucifixes found in Norway are dated to not earlier than the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, this does not mean they did not exist. The difference between a cross and a crucifix is that the image of Christ appears on the crucifix, but not on the cross. Even from early sources we can conclude that the Norsemen were aware of this difference and even had different words for the two objects: *crossar* ‘crosses’ and *roðor* ‘crucifixes’.

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<sup>80</sup>Solli 1996b: 101

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 103

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.109-111

<sup>83</sup>Skre 1997: 17

The earliest crucifixes all show a victorious, monarchical Christ, of the *Christus-regens* Germanic type. He usually stands in front of the cross with his eyes open and his arm stretched out, and is portrayed as a ruler, as a triumphant king<sup>84</sup>. The reason why Christ is interpreted like this in the early decades after the conversion to Christianity is that he had to look stronger and more powerful than the old gods in order for the Norsemen to accept him. This suggests the fact that people had to see Christianity as a better religion than the old *siðr*, and God as more powerful and more impressive than the old gods. Otherwise, it is less likely that the farmers, as well as any other class of people, would accept it. The new faith had to be in conformity with the old ideals<sup>85</sup>. An early example of this kind of crucifixes was found in the Leikanger church from Sogn, Norway. This crucifix dated to around 1150 portrays a triumphant Christ that stands on the cross and has his eyes open, as well as a crown on his head, which emphasizes even more on his role of a powerful monarch. After the image of the victorious Son of God lost its popularity, there was added paint to imitate blood on Christ's wounds.

After the transition to Christianity was completed, the image of the triumphant Christ started to lose popularity since the Old Norse ideas on the portrait of faith were fading. Thus the image of the suffering Son of God, of the *Christus-patiens* type, started to prevail. This change, however, did not take place in a short time span, but needed a period of transition from the old image to the new one. Consequently, we can find both types of crucifixes from the same generation, in the same place. An example for this can be found in Sør-Trøndelag, at the Horg church. Here there have been discovered two crucifixes, both dated to around 1150. One of them displays Christ as a victorious king, while the other is of the *Christus-patiens* type. Although the second item displays Christ in a suffering position at such an early age, this kind of crucifixes only became common during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Before this time, the *Christus-regens* type was the most popular one<sup>86</sup>.

Henrik von Achen believes that although there were no crucifixes found that belonged to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it does not mean that they did not exist. He argues that there was probably at least one crucifix in every church. Moreover, he tries, by analysing the younger crucifixes, to determine how the older ones looked like. Thus he concludes that, even though it is impossible to give a definite answer on the matter, the oldest crucifixes must have borrowed

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<sup>84</sup> Achen 1995: 278-279

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 282-283

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 279-280

Norse themes, must have suffered an *interpretatio norroena*<sup>87</sup>. His theory suggests that the crucified Christ must have been associated with Odin who also sacrificed himself, as described in *Hávamál*, for nine nights and was wounded with a spear. Moreover, he states that even in the earliest Christian times in Norway, Christ was portrayed as a triumphant king on the cross<sup>88</sup>. However plausible, these are still only presumptions and we cannot conclude with certainty that this is the way the oldest crucifixes actually looked like.

## **Chapter II.7: Runic inscriptions**

Although we know that there was Christian activity performed during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, surprisingly enough the runic material that we have from Norway from this period of time or earlier does not give us any information about the religious changes that took place at that time. However, the 11<sup>th</sup> century provides us with few important runic inscriptions that give us some information related to Christianity in Norway.

The Galteland rune stone found in Evje, Aust-Agder is important when it comes to the history of Christianity on Norwegian soil. The carving on this stone ends with *Einn er Goð* ‘God is one’. What is especially interesting about this inscription is that it can be dated rather precisely. This essential rune stone was most likely raised around the year 1020<sup>89</sup>. Thus, we can conclude that Christianity was at least in some areas of Norway well established by the first decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Probably the most important rune stone that gives us information about the new religion in Norway is the Kuli stone. This stone was found in the North-Western part of the country and it consists not only of a significant runic inscription, but also of the carving of a large cross. Moreover, the inscription’s two lines also begin with crosses. The second line of the runic carving is the essential one because it testifies that *Tólf vetr hafði kristindómr verit i Nóregi* ‘Twelve winters had Christianity been in Norway’<sup>90</sup>. Thus, by the time this rune stone was raised, Christianity had already been in Norway for twelve years. The Kuli stone is exceptional from a religious point of view for two main reasons: on the one hand, it is the first runic inscription that contains the Norwegian word for ‘Christianity’. On the other hand, it may be connected to an important moment in the history of religion in Norway. Such an important event can be the introducing of Christianity as the only and official religion in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 284

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 293

<sup>89</sup> Spurkland 2005: 99

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 109



Norway. Terje Spurkland argues in his book *Norwegian runes and runic inscriptions* that most likely this rune stone was raised in 1034. Thus, the important moment can be dated to 1022. Scholars have tried to discover exactly what that event was and many of them agree that it might refer to the legislative assembly held by King Olav Haraldsson and bishop Grimkell at Moster in which they declared Christianity as the only official and accepted religion in the country<sup>91</sup>.

Another rune stone that witnesses to the idea that Christianity was well established at least in some parts of Norway during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century is the Dynna stone. Unlike the stones from above, this one was not raised, but was used as a bridge: *Gunnvǫr gerði brú* ‘Gunnvǫr made a bridge’. The Christian custom of building bridges in memory of the dead so that their souls could enter the afterlife easier was very common in Sweden. However, in Norway there were found only two rune stones that follow this tradition. The decoration on the Dynna stone also indicates that the stone was carved in a Christian setting. This ornamentation consists of the representation of the story about Christ’s birth. This runic inscription can be approximately dated to the end of the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and it contains the oldest known Christian pictorial art in Norway<sup>92</sup>.

Other runic inscriptions from Norway that are Christian are the Sokndal stone (which is the second inscription that mentions the building of a bridge for a dead person’s soul), Stavanger III (which illustrates that a priest had raised the stone) and Oddernes II (which refers to a certain Eyvindr and tells us that he build the church from Oddernes). All these inscriptions can be dated with approximation to the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Chapter II.8: Conclusions**

The theory suggesting that the Norsemen started their contact with Christian countries as early as the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century leads to the conclusion that Christianity began its influence on the travelling Norwegians and probably also on their families and close friends before the Viking Age. Thus, the process of Christianization can be considered very long, lasting from the first contacts with the new religion until sometime around the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, the actual conversion to the new faith does not coincide in duration and significance with the one of Christianization. The conversion probably started during the reign of Haakon the Good, the first missionary king of Norway and ended around the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity became the single

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 111

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 105-106

recognized religion in Norway. The process of conversion represents the period of time when big groups of people started adopting the new religion, until the majority of the population became Christian.

The archaeological material as well as the stone crosses suggests that the Christianization process was not homogenous in the entire country. People from the coast lines became acquainted with the new religion earlier than the ones from the inland. The stone crosses, although it is rather impossible to date most of them, have probably been raised since the second half on the 9<sup>th</sup> century and represent the direct influence of the new faith coming from the British Isles. Scholars conclude that the Christian influence was bigger on the coast line, from the South-East to the North-West because the people living there had more possibilities to travel across the seas and meet other, Christian cultures, than the people living in the innermost areas of Norway. A proof to this can also be represented by the grave material. There have been discovered a large number of Christian graves and a decreasing number of heathen ones dated to the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century on the coasts. In addition, also the heathen graves and burial customs might have been influenced by the new religion and this suggestion is confirmed also by the grave finds. According to Per Hærnes the earliest proof of Christian influence on heathen burial customs can be dated to as early as the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest churches from Norway can be dated to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century/beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The reason why they were not built earlier is probably because the number of Christians was not big and therefore there was not so much need for them. However, after more and more people adopted the new faith, the need for priest services grew and so the number of churches increased. As archaeologists point out, the number of churches expanded during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This can only lead to the conclusion that in this period of time probably the majority of the population had been converted.

Although it is believed that all churches needed to have at least one crucifix, the earliest crucifixes that can be found in Norway are dated to no sooner than the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Still, they represent important material due to the fact that they give us a good insight on how Christ and the new religion were perceived in the middle ages and probably also during the late Viking Age. Since the earliest crucifixes portray Christ as a triumphant monarch that stands on the cross with his eyes open and arms stretched out and who is not dying or suffering, we can conclude that the new religion was also influenced by the old *siðr* and not only the other way round. In the heathen mentality it was probably impossible to worship a god that was

showing signs of weakness, showing that he was suffering or dying. In concordance with what we know about the old ideas a god must show power and strength as well as the ability to be a good leader. Thus, in order to make Christ more appealing in the heathen eyes the clergymen had to portray the Son of God as stronger, more powerful and wiser than all the heathen gods. However, after the old mentality started to fade away, when Christianity was well inserted in all parts of life and society, the crucifixes started to portray the Byzantine image of Christ. This happened more likely during the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The number of runic inscriptions from Norway that indicate information related to Christianity and its early influence on people is surprisingly low in comparison with the number of such finds from Sweden or Denmark. However, the few Norwegian rune stones give us some information about the changes that occurred during the 11<sup>th</sup> century due to the transition to the new faith. For instance, some of them show the new interest in the dead's soul and afterlife, things which were unfamiliar to the heathen Norsemen. Also, since the birth of Christ is pictured on the Dynna stone, it can be concluded that this moment was probably well known and very popular among the newly converted Norwegians. Moreover, the Kuli stone indicates that the possibility that Christianity became the only official religion in Norway in the year 1022 under the reign of King Olav Haraldsson. Consequently, this inscription is very important in the religious history of this Scandinavian country.

The work of the missionary clergymen must not be underestimated when it comes to the Christianization of Norway. Without them people would probably not be able to understand and to accept to change their faith. Without them it would have been impossible to have churches as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, since they are the founders of these churches. It is due to the missionaries that bigger groups of people embraced the new religion. Without them, the missionary kings could not be able to actually change the mentality of the people. They could force the Norwegians not to practice the old customs, but to perform the Christian ones instead, but they could not make them understand the meaning and the purpose of these new practices. According to several scholars the first missionaries came to Norway during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. However, most of the missionary clergymen came here during the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the process of conversion was more powerful.

The material spread over a long period of time leads to the conclusion that the Christianization process was complex and it took the farmers several centuries to change their mentality and perspectives on everything. The same material shows us that the

Christianization of Norway was not unitary. Some regions were converted to the new religion earlier and easier than other ones. This heterogeneous development was stronger during the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, than it was, for instance, during the first contacts with the new religion. The complexity of the religious transition connotes that the old religion was still strong even during the reign of the missionary kings and that changing the comprehension and attitudes of a whole population was a long, difficult task.

### Chapter III: The role of the ruler in Christianity's impact on the Norwegian farmers

A very important role in the conversion of Norway from *siðr* to Christianity was played by the rulers of the country and their thoughts and attitudes towards the new religion. The missionary priests and bishops, together with the religious influence from foreign countries, were among the most important factors that led to the Christianization of the Norsemen. However, without the influence of the kings, the new religion might have not succeeded against the old *siðr* over such a large number of people.

A possible reason why the kings had more influence on people than, for instance, the missionary clergymen is that they had considerably more power and therefore they were more respected in the country. If we are to look at Snorri Sturluson's image of the Norwegian civilization during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to conclude that the society of that time was not well organized. A ruler could easily be dethroned by a more powerful chieftain that had a bigger army and more riches. Thus, having little sense of security, the people would chose to follow the more powerful ruler, the one they thought more likely to be victorious<sup>93</sup>. In correlation to this, it is plausible that the farmers would follow the religious believes dictated by the ruler than by powerless clergymen. Moreover, the farmers would have had more respect towards the beliefs and requests of their chieftain than those of a foreign priest who lacked the means of defending himself or of making his preaches regarded with esteem. The missionary clergymen probably gained the majority of the people's respect only after the kings involved actively in the conversion to Christianity, when they had the full support of the rulers and when some of the wealthier ones even had their own body of armed men to protect them.

In this chapter I will focus on how Christianity was perceived by the Norwegian free farmers under the reign of three important rulers: King Haakon the Good, the first missionary king of Norway, Earl Haakon, the last heathen ruler of the country, and Olav Tryggvason, the second missionary king of Norway who probably managed to convert the largest number of not only Norwegians, but also Icelanders to Christianity. Here I will also draw the attention on the relationship between the rulers of the country and the farmers and on the intermediate role played by other, mostly less powerful, chieftains in the act of conversion, as well as on their influence on the farmers from a religious aspect.

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<sup>93</sup> Bagge 1994: 12

## Chapter III.1: Christianity's impact on the Norwegian farmers under the reign of King Haakon the Good

### Chapter III.1.a: Winning Norway

Haakon the Good was the younger brother of Eirik Bloodaxe and son of Harald Hairfair and Thora Mosterstang. At a young age he was sent by his father to England to be fostered by the English king, Athelstan<sup>94</sup>. The insular king was Christian and it is possible therefore to believe that, even though Harald Hairfair was heathen, he wanted his son to be brought up in a Christian milieu. Thus, he might have been a sympathizer of the new religion. King Athelstan baptised the boy and taught him about Christianity so that he became a true believer and defender of this religion<sup>95</sup>. After the death of his father Haakon went back to Norway and dethroned his brother Eirik Bloodaxe. He was helped and supported by the English king, but most especially by Earl Sigurd and his men from Trøndelag. After making promises and persuading the people, he also gained the support of most of the farmers from his father's kingdom. Without this reinforcement it is likely that Haakon could not have been able to make his brother abandon the crown and flee from his country.

### Chapter III.1.b: Haakon the Good's reign

According to *Ágrip*, Theodoricus Monachus's *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* King Haakon reigned for around 25-26 years mostly in peace. *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla* are more detailed, adding that the ruler was not only wise and kind, but that he was also a good legislator, creating the Gulating law as well as the Frostating law. In the poem *Bersöglisvísur* written by Sigvatr Þórðarson in praise of Magnus Olavsson the skald informs us about how popular, respected and good at making new laws Haakon was. Thus, even around 60 years after his death the king was still praised and considered as an example to be followed<sup>96</sup>.

Probably the biggest difference between King Haakon and his people lies in the sphere of religion. While the majority of the people, both farmers and chieftains, were heathen, the king was a devoted Christian. One of the first steps Haakon the Good took in converting his people to his faith was to make a law saying that the heathen Yule should be celebrated at the same time as the Christian Christmas<sup>97</sup>. But as soon as his leading position in the country became more secure he began sending the Christian message to his people. His strategy,

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<sup>94</sup> *Harald Hairfair's saga* 40; Theodoricus 4

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>96</sup> Bagge 2004: 197

<sup>97</sup> *Haakon the Good's saga* 13

according to Snorri Sturluson, was to first convert and baptize his closest friends who, due to their friendship relation could not refuse the wish of the king. After establishing a stronger Christian foundation in Norway formed by powerful people he brought several priests and a bishop from England to his country in order to accomplish his wish of converting his entire people to Christianity. He also built churches and assigned priests in them and hence managed to Christianize, with the help of the clergymen and his Christian friends, several people.

When he put forward his wish of Christianizing the people of Møre, Romsdal and Trøndelag he faced some problems. In *Heimskringla* Snorri Sturluson highlights that Trøndelag was probably the most powerful region in Norway, where the chieftains had even more influence on the farmers than the king himself. Therefore, when Haakon the Good tried to convert the people of Møre and Romsdal we can understand why they decided to consult with the Tronds before taking any decision and to meet the king in order to discuss this religious matter at a later date, at Frosta. The king granted the people's wish and organized an assembly at Frosta in order to express his wish about converting all the farmers from the region to Christianity. But, according to Snorri's *Heimskringla*, when Haakon the Good told the farmers that they should not work on the seventh day of the week because it was a holy day, the people revolted, but not just due to religious reasons. They were also afraid that they will have to work less, and thus get less food and be less prosperous. This represents one of the things that show how closely tied the old *siðr* was with the society and with the ways of living, how much it conformed to the farmers' everyday life and needs. Christianity, on the other hand, seemed to them not necessarily a wrong faith, but mostly an incompatible religion to their ways of life and means of obtaining enough food and goods.

During the same assembly, one of the farmers called Asbjørn decided to speak for all his fellow men against the wish of the king. Snorri Sturluson manages to give Asbjørn's speech a dramatic emphasis, but it is likely that the farmer expressed fairly the same idea as the one described by the Icelandic historian. He asked Haakon the Good to let them keep their old faith in return to their friendship towards him. Asbjørn also reminds the ruler that they have the power to renounce him and find another king if he would wish to use violence in order to convert them to Christianity. Asbjørn declares that the old customs must also be good enough since they had always worked well for them and since their ancestors, who were wiser than

them, chose them instead of any other faith<sup>98</sup>. The farmer's opinion towards the forefathers is a good example of how praised and respected the ancestors were, of the vitality of the ancestor cult in the pre-Christian society. After Asbjørn's speech Haakon the Good decided not to let the farmers decide for themselves which religion to follow, even though that would mean the victory of the old traditions against Christianity. A plausible reason why the king did not argue more with the Tronds is that, although the king was very powerful, he probably did not have the military force to fight against them, especially since the region of Trøndelag was probably the most powerful in the country during that time.

After the king told the Trond farmers that he would accept their desire to remain faithful to the old gods, the people demanded from him to take part in a *blót* just as his forefathers did, in order to really prove to them that he holds no bitterness towards them, but also because, according to the custom, the highest chieftain should not only be present at sacrifices, but conduct them as well. This could be explained by the theory that the ruler was believed to be empowered with a special kind of luck that could bring peace, prosperity and richness to the lands under his authority. Thus, if such a ruler performs or is the head of a sacrificial ritual, then the luck of his country would be even greater and he would be even more appreciated and respected by his people. But, since the king was still a Christian, it is rational to agree with the saga authors who say that Haakon was not at all pleased with the farmers' request:

**18. *Bændr þröngva Hákonni til blóta.***

Um haustit at vetrnótuum var blótveizla á Hlöðum, ok sótti þar til konungr. Hann hafði jafnan fyrr verit vanr, ef hann var staddr þar er blót váru, at matast í litlu húsi með fá menn; en bændr töldu at því, er hann sat eigi í hásæti sínu, þá er mestr var mannfagnaðr; sagði jarl, at hann skyldi eigi þá svá gera; var ok svá at konungr sat í hásæti sínu. En er hit fyrsta full var skenkt, þá mælti Sigurðr jarl fyrir ok signaði Óðni ok drakk af horninu til konungs. Konungr tók við ok gerði krossmark yfir. Þá mælti Kárr af Grýtingi; hví ferr konungr nú Svá? vill hann eigi enn blóta? Sigurðr jarl svarar: konungr gerir svá, sem þeir allir, er trúa á mátt sinn ok megin, ok signa full sitt Þór; hann gerði hamarsmark yfir, áðr hann drakk. Var þá kyrt um kveldit. Eptir um daginn, er menn géngu til borða, þá þustu bændr at konungi, sögðu at hann skyldi eta þá hrossaslátr. Konungr vildi þat fyrir engan mun. Þá báðu þeir hann drekka soðit; hann vildi þat eigi. Þá báðu þeir hann eta flotit; hann vildi þat ok eigi. Ok var þá búit við atgöngu. Sigurðr jarl vildi sætta þá, ok bað þá hætta storminum; ok bað hann konung gína yfir ketilhödduna, er soðreykinn hafði lagt upp af hrossaslátrinu, ok var smjörug haddan. Þá gékk konungr til ok brá línúkk um hödduna ok gein yfir, ok gékk síðan til hásætis, ok líkaði hvárigum vel.<sup>99</sup>

The chieftain who ruled over Trøndelag was Earl Sigurd of Lade. He was, although heathen, a friend of the king who managed not only to give him good counsel, but also to act like an

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 18



intermediary between the king and the Trond farmers. Earl Sigurd was popular and well praised by the people under him not only because he was powerful, but also because he was kind and generous during the sacrificial offerings, as stated by Kormákr Ögmundarson in his skaldic poem *Sigurðardrápa*<sup>100</sup>. He was also a good politician and diplomat, helping the king and the farmers to get to a point of agreement in order to avoid a military conflict between them. As Snorri Sturluson points out in his saga about King Haakon the Good, the farmers acknowledged not just the king as their superior, but also other chieftains. And, in some cases like the one mentioned above, these chieftains could be stronger than the king and thus making the farmers follow these leaders and not the king, if their opinions happened to differ. This again highlights what Sverre Bagge points out, namely that, at least in the society portrayed by Snorri Sturluson, any king could be dethroned and replaced by a stronger figure, leaving the country rather vulnerable. Consequently, the farmers usually had no choice but to follow the most powerful, the one they believed to become the winner<sup>101</sup>.

The smaller chieftains were also important in order to keep their kin or community together. The people belonging to a small community might have had to follow the leader in order to keep their own society strong, but also in order to remain a part of that society, outside of which a person was estranged and weak. On the other hand, the expulsion of small society members would make that certain society weaker<sup>102</sup>. Therefore the individual and the fellowship were interdependent and in order for things inside the community to function optimally, the individuals had to follow their leader, the chieftain. This chieftain, in return, probably had to answer for his deeds and had to submit in front of a bigger chieftain. Therefore, Haakon the Good, as well as the other missionary kings, aimed first of all at converting the leaders to Christianity because they knew that if the leader adopted the new religion, so would the followers. This probably made it easier to convert people since it was enough to convince the leader that the new belief is better than the old one and everyone would follow that leader, instead of trying to convert each and every individual separately.

*Heimskringla* points out that the chieftains of the farmers from and around Trondheim did not forget the way the king behaved at that sacrifice, behaviour that could probably be described as rude. They must have made peace with the king only at the insistence of Earl Sigurd, but as the Yule approached, they decided, first of all, to burn Christian churches as

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>101</sup> Bagge 1994: 12

<sup>102</sup> Holter 1993: 17

well as kill their priests, and second, to convince the king, even if they had to use force, to come to and actively participate to the Yule *blót*:

#### 19. *Blótveizla á Mæri.*

Um vetrinn eptir var búit til jólaveizlu konungi inn á Mæri. En er at leið jölunum, þá lögðu þeir stefnu með sér átta höfðingjar, er mest réðu fyrir blótum í öllum Þrændalögum; þeir váru 4 utan or Þrándheimi: Kárr af Grýtingi, Ásbjörn af Meðalhúsum, Þorbergr af Varnesi, Ormr af Ljoxu; en af Innþrændum: Bótólfr af Ölvishaugi, Narfi af Staf or Veradal, Þrándr haka af Eggju, Þórir skegg af Húsabæ í eygni Iðri. Þessir 8 menn bundust í því, at þeir 4 af Útþrændum skyldu eyða kristninni, en þeir 4 af Innþrændum skyldu neyða konung til blóta. Útþrændir fóru 4 skipum suðr á Mæri ok drápu þar presta 3 ok brenndu kirkjur 3; fóru aptr síðan. En er Hákon konungr ok Sigurðr jarl kómu inn á Mæri með hirð sína þá, váru þar bændr komnir, ok höfðu allfjölment. Hinn fyrsta dag at veizlunni veittu bændr konungi atgöngu ok báðu hann blóta, en hétu honum afarkostum ella. Sigurðr jarl bar þá sáttmál í millum þeirra; kom þá svá, at Hákon konungr át nökkura bita af hrosslifr; drakk hann þá öll minni krossalaust, þau er bændr skenktu honum. En er veizlu þeirri var lokit, fór konungr ok jarl þegar út á Hlaðir; var konungr allúkátr, ok bjóst þegar í brott með öllu liði sínu or Þrándheimi, ok mælti svá, at hann skyldi fjölmennari koma í Þrándheim annat sinn, ok gjalda bóndum þenna fjándskap, er þeir höfðu til hans gert. Sigurðr jarl bað konung gefa Þrændum þetta eigi at sök, segir svá at, konungi mundi eigi þat duga at heitast eða herja á innanlandsfólk, þar sem mestr styrkr er landsins, sem í Þrándheimi var. Konungr var svá reiðr, at ekki mátti orðum við hann koma; fór hann í brott or Þrándheimi ok suðr á Mæri, dvaldist þar um vetrinn ok um várit; en er sumraði, dró hann lið at sér, ok váru þau orð á, at hann mundi fara með her þann á hendr Þrændum.<sup>103</sup>

These actions highlight again the fact that these particular chieftains were more powerful in comparison with the king. If Haakon the Good had a better army, then the Tronds would have showed him more respect. Not only that these chieftains made the king give them the liberty of keeping their old faith, but they also demanded from their ruler to follow the same customs as they did, emphasizing their lack of respect towards their less powerful leader. During the Yule celebrations when the chieftains had acted against the king's religion and will, they not only destroyed churches, killed priests and forced Haakon the Good to participate in the *blót*, but they also forced him to make an offering. If we are to believe Snorri Sturluson's description, the chieftains threatened the king violently and not even Earl Sigurd could do much this time in order to convince the other leaders to change their minds. Therefore, King Haakon had no other choice but to eat horse liver and to drink for the old gods.

Since the written sources do not say much about the king's other plans of conversion, there is a possibility that other farmers accepted the new religion not only because they had less powerful chieftains and thus could not stand against the king, but also because they actually

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<sup>103</sup> *Haakon the Good's saga* 19

wanted to be Christianized. The fact that neither *Heimskringla*, nor other sagas point out the possible successful conversion process that took place under the reign of Haakon the Good may be explained by the hypothesis that the writers wanted to highlight more how successful in converting the Norwegians were the other two missionary kings, Olav Tryggvason and Olav Haraldsson, who are considered also to be the most important ones and the best examples of Christian authorities in Norway. Haakon the Good could also be considered less crucial in the act of conversion also because he died pagan. Theodoricus Monachus probably considered King Haakon so insignificant from the point of view of Christianizing the people that he did not even mention in his saga that Haakon was a Christian, although there are reasons to believe he knew this detail<sup>104</sup>.

After the episode in which the chieftains forced the king to sacrifice, Snorri Sturluson tried to defend King Haakon's reputation by describing his plan of gathering an army in order to seek revenge. However, he did not get the chance to use his army against the Tronds because he had to face another threat, one coming from the South, from the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe. Being in this situation Haakon the Good had no choice but to fight the bigger enemies, Eirik's sons. In order to have a bigger chance of winning against them, the king even made peace with the Trond chieftains so that they would help him in this battle. Thanks again to the influence of Earl Sigurd, the chieftains accepted to help the king and so the two parts reconciled. Although this was an interesting turn of events in the relationship between the chieftains and Haakon the Good, we do not know if Snorri Sturluson based his story on real facts or if he only tried to defend the king and his religion, pointing out that the king wanted to punish the chieftains, but because of external threats and because his army was not strong enough, he had no choice but to make peace with them, since he could not fight against the South and the North at the same time. Unfortunately it is impossible to say with certainty how Haakon the Good felt about the chieftains before the attack of his nephews, whether or not he reconciled with the Tronds due to this new threat or not. What is likely to believe, however, is that the king managed to obtain victory against the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe. This aspect is also described by the skald *Goðpormr sindri* in his *Hákonardrápa* from which Snorri Sturluson probably got much of his information about this battle.

#### Chapter III.1.c: Haakon the Good's fall

According to Snorri's *Heimskringla*, during his reign King Haakon the Good fought against the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe three times, each time being victorious and managing to make the

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<sup>104</sup> Bagge 2004: 187

brothers flee from battle. However, during their last hostile encounter, at Fitjar, the Norwegian king was struck by an arrow<sup>105</sup> which might have been thrown at him not by a fierce warrior but, ironically, by a servant. Nonetheless, this is more likely to represent just an assumption than a real fact. At least in order to make the story more dramatic, Snorri Sturluson states in his *Haakon the Good's saga* that the king did not die immediately after being injured, but that his wound bled for some time before he actually passed away. During this time he promised his country to the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe and confessed that even if he would not die from the wound, he would prefer to retreat among Christian men in order to repent his sins. Snorri portrays the king on his death bed as a good Christian who is asking for God's forgiveness and mercy, thus empowering the idea that although he was forced by the farmers from Trøndelag to eat horse liver and to sacrifice to the heathen gods, he still remained faithful to the Almighty God his entire life.

Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir wrote a skaldic poem dedicated to King Haakon's death which was probably contemporary with the event itself. This poem is called *Hákonarmál*. The most important difference between Finnsson's and Sturluson's descriptions is represented by the skald not mentioning Haakon the Good dying as a Christian. He relates that the king died heathen and that he even went to Valhalla after his death. The poet describes how, after dying, Haakon is taken by two Valkyries to Odin's realm where he is awaited and received by Hermod and Bragi who then take him to Odin. The fact that Haakon is hesitant about the god's behaviour towards him may suggest that he actually was Christian before dying and he did not understand why he was asked for in Valhalla. His hesitation may be interpreted as a sign of fear towards the god. He may think that his religious beliefs from his life time could make the heathen god angry. However, since the poem points out Odin's happiness to have the king in his realm may suggest otherwise. Eyvindr skáldaspillir also adds in his poem that King Haakon protected the heathen temples and this is why he was well-received in Valhalla. This important piece of information may promote two possibilities regarding the king's religious beliefs. On the one hand, it is possible that, especially after the episode when he was forced to eat horse liver, he changed his religion back to heathendom and thus he wanted to protect the old cult places for obvious reasons. On the other hand, since he had never used violence in order to Christianize his people, it is likely that he had never destroyed their temples, either. If this is the case, maybe what Eyvindr skáldaspillir meant by pointing this

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<sup>105</sup> According to Theodoricus Monachus, *Ágrip* and Snorri Sturluson the king was struck by an arrow, but *Historia Norwegiae*, on the other hand, related that he was killed by a spear.

out is that, even though the king was not a heathen, he did not work against the old *siðr* and he respected all heathens as well as their cult places. He probably tried to convert his country, but when he was faced with a strong opposition, he must have stopped his missionary work, at least in some areas, such as Trøndelag.

#### Chapter III.1.d: Conclusions

Snorri Sturluson highlights the relationship between Haakon and the Trond chieftains in his *Heimskringla*. However, he does not say much about the king's accomplishments on converting the people from the other regions under his authority, where he had more influence, although many scholars such as Fridtjov Birkeli believe that Haakon the Good must have had more success in Christianizing other Norwegian farmers and chieftains from other, less powerful and less independent parts of Norway. One of the reasons why some scholars believe that Haakon's mission was successful especially on the west coast of Norway is represented by the amount of Christian evidence present in the area. For instance, Birkeli defends his theory stating that the first stone crosses from the west coast of the country could be dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> or the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, that is to around the time of Haakon's reign, and they could be interpreted as among the first Christian cult places<sup>106</sup>. Other scholars such as Britt Solli and Sverre Bagge add another possible piece of evidence to support the idea that Haakon the Good managed to convert a larger amount of people than the sagas reveal: the remains of a cemetery on Veøy dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century which is very likely to have been Christian.

Haakon the Good was the first Christian king of Norway. He tried to convert his people to his new religion but as the literary sources suggest, his success was limited. Probably the most striking thing about his attitude in Christianizing the Norwegians is that he had never used violence in his missionary acts. It is likely that if he had used this method, then the outcome of his deeds would have been more in his favour. One of the reasons why he chose not to use violence may be that he was not powerful enough, that other chieftains under his rule might have had a bigger army than him and therefore he knew that this procedure was bound to fail and that he could suffer more severe consequences, such as losing his power to rule the country or being killed. This is the case with the people of Trøndelag, who, at the time of Haakon's reign, were probably the most influential and most powerful in the country, so powerful that not even the king could stand against them.

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<sup>106</sup> Birkeli 1973

Since the sagas put much stress on the religious affairs between Haakon the Good and the Trøndelag farmers, but say little about how the other people viewed the new religion as presented to them by the king, it is difficult to come to a certain conclusion on how many people Haakon managed to Christianize. However, scholars tend to agree that his missionary work is probably underrated in the sagas and that he might have converted a larger number of people<sup>107</sup>, especially in the areas under his dominion where his influence was greater. Another possibility is that he managed to convert many farmers but, that after his death and especially during the reign of Earl Haakon Sigurdsson, many of these people returned to their old beliefs. On the other hand it is important when talking about Haakon the Good's missionary work to remember that although some people were familiar with Christianity from before the reign of Haakon, the majority of the population, however, must have been unaccustomed with it. This made it more difficult for them to accept it. Since not all Norwegians were travelling abroad and since most of them were settled farmers, the words of the new religion must have come as a shock to them. And if we add the fact that these farmers thought the old religion was working well for them as it did for their wiser ancestors, it is easy to assume that Haakon the Good's engagement in missionary work must have been a difficult task. Consequently, I believe his importance in Christianizing his country is even bigger, since he was the first one to try to convert the Norwegians. Moreover, unlike the other missionary kings that followed him, he did not use force and torture against the people in order to convert them. This might have also been in his disadvantage, since probably also due to his kindness and gentleness he was not as respected by certain chieftains as a king should be. In any case, he is highly significant from the point of view of Christianization since he was the one to start the conversion of Norway, having the most difficult task to accustom the people with a new religion, as well as with a new way of life. During the reign of the other missionary kings, however, it was probably easier to convert more people to Christianity since most of the farmers were already familiar with the new religion.

### **Chapter III.2: Christian impact on the Norwegian farmers under the reign of Earl Haakon Sigurdsson of Lade**

#### Chapter III.2.a: The reign of Eirik Bloodaxe's sons

After Haakon the Good's death, the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe succeeded him, sharing the kingdom together. But unlike the previous king, these brothers were anything but gentle and

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<sup>107</sup> Bagge 2004: 204

kind. In the last stanza of *Hákonarmál* Eyvindr skáldaspillir describes the time after Haakon's death as miserable:

21. Deyr fé,  
deyja frændr,  
eyðisk land ok láð;  
síz Hókon  
fór með heiðin goð,  
morg es þjóð of þeuð.

In addition, the poem informs us that the brothers were cruel. Snorri Sturluson mentions them as being Christian, although they did nothing in order to convert their people. However, they did destroy the old temples, not due to an ideological reason, but in order to steal their riches and because this probably entertained them. The Eirikssons are described by Snorri as greedy, harsh and bad at leading the country, following only the laws which brought them advantages and disregarding the other ones<sup>108</sup>.

Since the harvest was bad during the reign of the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe and since they were destroyers of heathen temples, as related in Eyvindr skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál*, the farmers, who were the ones suffering the most, might have believed that all these things happened because they had forsaken the old gods and the old customs, because they had stopped sacrificing for good seasons and because the rulers were not only Christian, but also destroyers of the old sacred cult places. Thus it is likely to believe that, especially out of fear of the gods, many of the people who converted to Christianity during Haakon's reign returned to the heathen belief. Another important factor which favoured the return to the old faith of the Norwegian farmers is represented by the reign of the heathen Earl Haakon Sigurdsson of Lade over Norway after the fall of the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe.

#### Chapter III.2.b: Winning Norway

Haakon was the son of Earl Sigurd, the faithful friend of King Haakon the Good, who died only two years after the death of his king, by the treachery of two of the Eirikssons, namely the Harald and Erling. After this event Earl Haakon tried to avenge his father by engaging in several battles against King Harald, but he was eventually forced to flee from Trondheim to Denmark, under the protection of the Danish king, Harald Bluetooth. During this time the earl killed Harald's foster son, Harald Greycloak, one of Eirik Bloodaxe's sons. After this deed, the earl had to fight against the brothers of Greycloak, but he was victorious. In

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<sup>108</sup>*The Eirikssons' saga* 2

addition, he convinced the Danish king that Gold-Harald could be dangerous to his kingdom and offered to kill him in return for some favours. Thus, the king of Denmark decided to make Haakon the ruler of Norway with the condition that he paid tribute to him and that he would gather his army and fight by Denmark's side, if the country was attacked. According to Snorri Sturluson's *Olav Tryggvason's saga* 24 and 27, after Earl Haakon became ruler of Norway, the Emperor Otto II bade the Danish king to accept Christianity. If not, he would go to battle against him. Hearing this, Harald Bluetooth called for the earl's help. They both gathered a strong army against the emperor, but still, Otto II defeated them. After this episode, both King Harald and Earl Haakon had no choice but to let themselves be christened. According to Snorri, the Danish king happily accepted the new religion after seeing a bishop holding hot iron in his hands without getting burned, after seeing how powerful the new religion made the bishop. It is plausible that this description is a mere invention of the historian, but what can be stated with certainty is that the Danish king did accept Christianity and converted the Danes to the new faith, as it is also carved on the Jelling II rune stone. However, the Norwegian earl was not pleased about converting to the new religion and therefore, when he was about to return to his country he dismissed all the clergymen who were supposed to go with him to Norway and preach about Christianity. Moreover, he also broke his connection with the Danish king and stopped paying him tribute. In this manner Earl Haakon became an independent ruler of Norway.

#### Chapter III.2.c: Earl Haakon's reign

As stated in *Skáldatal* Earl Haakon had nine skalds who wrote several poems about him. Although not all of them are preserved, and some of them are only partially preserved, the poems that we still have today say a lot about the earl's life, popularity, religion and bravery in battle. Probably the most important thing about these poems is that they were created during the reign of the earl, thus making them the only literary sources contemporary with his dominion. What is striking is the not so common large number of poets the earl had. A reason for this may be the fact that during the 10<sup>th</sup> century most of the skalds were heathen. The old *siðrand* skaldic poetry go hand in hand, since most of the *kennings* can be related to either the old gods or to heathen mythological events. The old tradition and beliefs may be regarded as the primary source of inspiration for the skalds. And since Earl Haakon was a dedicated heathen who protected the old religion, it is likely that the skalds wanted to be as close as possible to the ruler who shared the same beliefs with them.



The skaldic poetry is important when it comes to describing Earl Haakon as well as his reign over Norway. Since he was a heathen who deliberately rejected Christianity and since the writers of the sagas were all Christian, it can be understood that he was not popular among them. These writers generally saw the earl from a rather subjective point of view, describing him, among other things, as evil. The skaldic poetry, on the other hand, gives a different image of the earl. This, too, can be seen as subjective, considering the fact that the skalds were mostly composing praise poetry, but at least it gives another perspective of the earl. Moreover, since it is contemporary with Haakon's reign, skaldic poetry may give a better image of the events that took place during his rule than the sagas which were written down long after the death of the Lade earl.

In the poem *Háleygjatal*, the skald Eyvindr skáldaspillir makes a parallel to *Ynglingatal* stating that the earl, too, had divine ancestors, namely Odin and Skadi. It is not sure why the poet chose this god and this giantess in particular, whether or not the earl himself, as well as his father and maybe his other ancestors, believed that these two figures were protectors or prime members of their lineage. Whatever the case was, whether Earl Haakon believed to have a particular connection with Odin or not, *Háleygjatal* was created in order to prove the earl's divine right to rule Norway, in a parallel way to *Ynglingatal* which was probably created in order to show the legitimacy to rule by divine blood of the Svea kings. The poem promotes the idea that, since Haakon has divine ancestors, he clearly has the legitimacy to rule the country. This aspect must have played an important role in the heathen world. Probably the farmers had more respect for their ruler if he had divine origins. This ancestry could also be seen in the eyes of the farmers as a source of security. Maybe this idea made the farmers believe that the ruler is not only legitimate, but that he is also blessed with the luck of the gods in order to bring peace and prosperity to the land, things which were crucial for the well-being of the people, especially after the reign of the Eirikssons. The idea of having divine blood could also make the earl more popular and more loved by the heathen farmers.

The most important skaldic poetry praising Earl Haakon probably appeared after his victory against the Jomsvikings at Hjørungavágr<sup>109</sup>. This battle which played a crucial role in the earl's career is also described by sagas like Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Snorri Sturluson's *Olav Tryggvason's saga* and *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*. The poems, such as Tindr Hallkelsson's *Hákonardrápa*, talk about how brave Haakon was in battle and

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<sup>109</sup> Ström 1984: 441

that, although the opposition was strong and consisted of many brave warriors, the Norwegian earl and his army were even stronger and managed to defeat the Jomsvikings in the most courageous manner. Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, on the other hand, describe the fact that Haakon won the battle not because his army was strong or because he had good military skills, but because he made sacrifices to Þorgerðr Hǫlgabráúðr, thus winning in an unfair manner. These sagas even state that Haakon sacrificed one of his own sons in order to win the battle, thus trying to point out the earl's evilness and cruelty. Nonetheless, since *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* is meant to praise these Vikings and blame their enemies, it is possible that the author improvised this part in order to show that the Jomsvikings were actually stronger than the earl. But since he used demonic means in order to win, their defeat can be forgiven since no human beings can stand against supernatural affairs. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* was written by a Christian bishop in order to show esteem towards the Christian king who, through his missionary activity managed to convert a large amount of population to the new religion. Consequently, it may be believed that the author wrote this episode about Earl Haakon only in order to show how evil and cruel he was in comparison with Olav Tryggvason.

Snorri Sturluson mentions in *Olav Tryggvason's saga* that there were some people who believed that Haakon sacrificed his own son in order to defeat the Jomsvikings, but he does not say his own opinion about whether he agreed with this story or not. In this case I believe Snorri takes a more objective view upon the matter than the authors of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, since it is difficult to say with certainty exactly what happened during events that took place centuries after they were written down. The poetry which describes the battle of Hjörungavágr does not mention Earl Haakon sacrificing his son in order to gain the victory. This may be so either because the sacrifice did not happen or because it seemed irrelevant to the poets as well as to the listeners of the poems. Since Christianity and heathendom are two different religions that incorporate two different outlooks on life, human sacrifices were probably not uncommon in crisis situations before the transition to the new religion. It is possible that the skalds, as well as the heathen farmers, believed that their ruler did a normal, natural thing when he sacrificed his son, if this actually happened. Haakon's people must have thought that the sacrificing of their ruler's son had a greater purpose, namely to secure the peace in their country, and thus it could be justified. On the other hand, the human sacrifice viewed from a Christian perspective would be considered among the most abominable things that one could do. Consequently, if Haakon

actually sacrificed Erlingr in order to win the battle at Hjörungavágr, and so to secure peace in the land, then, from a heathen point of view, he probably did the right and the most honourable thing which a ruler could do for his country in such a grave situation.

According to the literary sources, after the battle from Hjörungavágr Earl Haakon ruled Norway for a significantly long period of time in peace and Snorri Sturluson relates in *Olav Tryggvason's saga* 45 that he had good relations with the Norwegian farmers and that the country was prosperous again. These aspects are also described in *Fagrskinna* 14 and in Einarr Skálaglamm's *Vellekla*. In this poem the skald praises the earl for protecting as well as rebuilding the heathen temples and for making sacrifices to the gods, thus the lands flourishing again:

15.

Öll lét senn hinn svinni  
sönn Einriða mönnum  
herjum kunn of herjuð  
hofs lönd ok vé banda.  
At veg jötna vitni  
valfalls of sæ allan  
(þeim stýra goð) geira  
garðs Hlórriði farði.

16.

Ok herþarfir hverfa  
(Hlakkar móts) til blóta  
(rauðbríkar fremsk rækir  
ríkr) ásmegir (slíku).  
Nú grær jörð sem áðan,  
aptr geirbrúar hapta  
auðrýrir lætr áru  
óhryggva vé byggva.

Probably one of the reasons why Earl Haakon was so popular among the farmers is because he reacted against Christianity, trying to keep the old traditions alive, traditions which were important and closely tied to the everyday life and habits of the farmers. Even though many Norwegians must have become Christian during the reign of King Haakon the Good, after his death and especially after experiencing the harsh life under the Eirikssons, most of the people had probably returned to the old faith, fearing that otherwise they would upset the gods even

more and that they could not get any other fertile seasons. Earl Haakon was a popular ruler probably also because, in a time of religious change, he had the same faith as the majority of his people. He shared the same ideas and beliefs with them, making their relationship harmonious.

#### Chapter III.2.d: Earl Haakon's fall

Nevertheless, in conformity with Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* and Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Earl Haakon, around the end of his ruling period, became less popular among his men because he was greedier, more proud and more pretentious. In addition, he also started to mistreat women, even those who were of high rank, married or not, by fornicating with them, with or without their will. The sagas relate that this was definitely unpleasant for the farmers and so they soon started to make plans in order to remove the earl from his position. This shows that, even though Haakon was powerful, the farmers, especially the ones from Trøndelag still had the possibility to rise against the ruler if he did something that should be punished. Moreover, their attitude towards Haakon's behaviour shows that honour played a big role in their lives. The earl was first of all powerful due to his men. But if they would turn against him, he would be left with no defence. Haakon's popularity decreased by the time Olav Tryggvason was on the verge of confronting him in order to conquer the throne of Norway. From this we can draw a plausible conclusion that, although Haakon shared the same ideology as his people, this was not enough to keep him popular during his entire reign. For the farmers the religious beliefs of their ruler were important, but still not as crucial as the ruler's overall behaviour towards his people. When the earl started to act like an unworthy leader, his people rose against him, without giving consideration to their similarities on the religious level.

The end of Earl Haakon's rule over Norway, as well as his death, is described in several written sources such as Theodoricus Monachus's *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. All the authors describe the above mentioned events in more or less the same way, some giving more details than others, but all sticking to the same main ideas. Earl Haakon lost his popularity among the farmers because he began acting harsh against his people, especially against the women. Thus the farmers decided to go after the earl and kill him because they would not accept such behaviour from their leader. They managed to unite against Haakon, leaving him with almost no allies and went after him. During the same time, Olav Tryggvason came to Norway in order to conquer the throne and he was pleased to find

out that the earl was in no capacity to fight against him. Moreover, he was actually welcomed by the people and they all agreed that they should unite against the earl. Finding out that an entire army was opposing him, Haakon decided it was best to hide from the angry farmers, accompanied only by his servant, Karkr. But when realizing that the situation was more serious than he first thought and that Olav Tryggvason became an ally of the farmers, he asked for Thora's help, his trustful mistress and friend. She told them that Olav Tryggvason had killed his son Erlendr, who was one of the few men that were still on the earl's side. Thereupon, seeing there is no other choice for him, Haakon hid inside a pigsty together with his servant, while Thora helped cover the pigsty. When Olav, together with the army of farmers, came to Thora's property, the future king of Norway stated that he would reward anyone who could bring him the head of the earl. Since Olav said these words when he was close enough to the pigsty, the two apostates heard everything. Karkr, even though he was the earl's servant, could not resist the temptation of being rewarded and therefore he cut Haakon's throat while he was asleep and took his head to Olav in order to get his reward. However, the new king of Norway was not pleased by the fact that Karkr was a traitor and, instead of rewarding him, he killed him in the same way the servant killed his master.

#### Chapter III.2.e: Conclusions

The way in which the earl found his death, being killed by his own servant while sleeping in a pigsty, can be seen as disgraceful. We do not know with certainty if this is exactly the way he died or if the authors of the sagas added or modified some details in order to make the story of his death more infamous. Nevertheless, it could be a possibility that the writers did not give a truthful image of the events first of all because they wrote down these things several centuries after they took place and thus the description of the events could have been altered by time through being transmitted orally for several generations. Secondly, these authors could have created a shameful death for the earl also because he was not only a heathen, but he refused on purpose to accept Christianity. He denied the religion to which the writers belonged and therefore he was most likely hated by all Christian men. The idea that he was not liked can be recognised especially in the sagas of Theodoricus Monachus and Oddr Snorrason who describe the earl as generally being arrogant, evil, harsh, greedy and deceitful, and as having an abominable behaviour towards women. The subjectivity of Theodoricus Monachus and his hostility towards the earl can easily be noticed in his manners of describing the heathen sacrifices and the heathen gods which he calls demons. Snorri Sturluson, on the other hand, although he is also Christian, seems to try to understand Earl

Haakon in a way that had not been done by the other two writers. He tries to understand the heathen perspectives and not to blame Haakon as much as Theodoricus Monachus and Oddr Snorrason did. Sturluson even admits more openly than Snorrason that for a long period of time Norway was happy under the rule of the earl who brought peace and prosperity and who was thus popular and loved by the farmers.

During the reign of Haakon Sigurdsson and that of Haakon the Good the farmers, especially the ones from Trøndelag benefitted of power and influence. They could make someone the ruler of the country, but they could also dethrone that ruler if he did not appear to be worthy of his status. This happened to Earl Haakon. For the longest part of his reign Haakon could be described as a respected figure who gained the autonomy of his country and as a devoted heathen who built and protected the temples as well as made sacrifices to the heathen gods for the wealth, peace and happiness of his land. All these things made him popular among the farmers who had the opportunity to freely return to their old traditions and customs. However, since Earl Haakon's attitude and behaviour changed during the last part of his reign, so did the farmers' impressions towards him. And when the earl's behaviour became too unfitting for a good ruler, the farmers, with Olav Tryggvason by their side, dethroned him. The farmers did not care anymore about the earl sharing the same religion with them, showing that the honourable manner of conduct was more important than the ideology of the ruler. This could lead us to the conclusion that maybe the old *siðr* stopped playing such an important role in the lives of the farmers after their closer encounter with Christianity, after they had the opportunity to get accustomed to some of its aspects. On the other hand, it could also mean that during the earl's reign there were more Christian people in Norway than the skaldic poetry makes us believe, but that these Christians were not bothered by the religious diversity of the country, and nor were the heathens troubled by the Christians. Thus the fact that the earl was heathen did not represent an important matter to the angry farmers who wanted to dismiss Haakon from his ruling position.

### **Chapter III.3: Christian impact on the Norwegian farmers under the reign of King Olav Tryggvason**

#### Chapter III.3.a: Olav Tryggvason's baptism

Olav Tryggvason, just like Haakon the Good, left Norway when he was just a child. The first Christian king of Norway spent most of his life at the court and under the protection of the English King Athelstan. Olav's life, on the other hand, was filled with events and adventures that include him being sold as a slave, raiding and winning many battles, thus gaining power,

riches and respect<sup>110</sup>. By the time he returned to Norway Olav was already powerful and well-known throughout many parts of Europe especially due to his plundering and success in battle.

According to Snorri Sturluson, Olav became Christian on the Scilly Isles. Here he met a wise man who was able to predict forthcoming events. After being convinced of the man's abilities, Olav asked him for advice and he replied to him that he should receive baptism. For this reason the future king of Norway and his men converted to the new faith and learned more about it from intellectual clergymen<sup>111</sup>. Theodoricus Monachus also states that Olav became Christian on the Scilly Isles, but he tells that Olav swore to take the new faith when he was in danger of losing his life during a battle, if that would save him. Since he managed to escape the crisis situation due to divine intervention, he decided to become Christian<sup>112</sup>. Although both stories are extraordinary and apocryphal, there are reasons to believe, however, that Olav may have become Christian on the Scilly Isles. Oddr Snorrason also adds in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* that Olav had never sacrificed to the gods because he had always felt an animosity towards the old *siðr* and the heathen temples. Nonetheless, this detail may be the creation of the saga author, since it was most likely impossible at the time he wrote the saga to have known such details about Olav's life and since he tries to highlight the idea that the king was sent by God for the mission to Christianize the heathens.

### Chapter III.3.b: Winning Norway

When Olav Tryggvason decided to return to his homeland the ruler of Norway, Earl Haakon, was losing popularity among the farmers who began conspiring against him. By this time Olav had already gained many riches, power and respect, as related in the sagas. Consequently, it was the best moment for him to come to Norway and win the crown, as well as the sympathy of the Norwegians.

Theodoricus Monachus and Snorri Sturluson relate that Olav Tryggvason first arrived in Norway at Moster, on the west coast of the country. From the first moments after Olav's reaching the Norwegian soil one of his main goals, besides becoming the ruler of the country, was to Christianize the heathen farmers. This idea can be concluded from Snorri's *Heimskringla* in which the historian states that right after his arrival at Moster, Olav held a

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<sup>110</sup> The adventures of Olav Tryggvason from his childhood may be disputed and there are several scholars, such as Sverre Bagge, who believe that these events may not be historically correct (Bagge 1993).

<sup>111</sup> *Olav Tryggvason's saga* 31

<sup>112</sup> *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* 7

Christian mass there and later built a church in the same place.<sup>113</sup> Olav Tryggvason's first action in Norway shows that he was serious about his plans of making Norway Christian, as well as enthusiastic and impatient about doing so, especially since he was not yet the ruler of the country.

Although Olav Tryggvason is described as a brave man who won many battles, he did not have to engage in any war in order to win the highest leading position in Norway since the circumstances of becoming king were in his favour. By the time he reached Agdenes, the farmers had already joined against the earl who was now defenceless and who had no choice but to hide from them in order to remain alive. When Haakon's servant, Karkr, heard that Olav would reward anyone who could find and kill the earl, he betrayed his master and cut his throat in order to gain the new leader's appreciation. However, he did not get the result he expected because Olav Tryggvason considered him a traitor and killed him in the same way he killed his master. The new ruler of Norway was immediately accepted by the farmers who were happy that they discarded the earl who was nicknamed 'the evil'. Snorri Sturluson, unlike any other saga author, tries to defend Haakon by admitting that although his behaviour changed to the worse during his last years of existence, one could not disregard his exceptional leading abilities and his great bravery which made him win the important battle against the Jomsvikings, making Norway an independent kingdom. Snorri Sturluson regards the earl as generous and wise and he blames his death on the divine will of God to end the era of heathen sacrifices and to replace them with Christian masses<sup>114</sup>.

### Chapter III.3.c: Missionary work

Olav Tryggvason was crowned during a legislative assembly in Trondheim soon after the death of Earl Haakon and the sagas relate that everyone respected him and obeyed him, and that everyone wanted him to be the King of Norway. After achieving this title, Tryggvason's main wish was, according to the sagas, to Christianize all the people in his country. The first to convert were his relatives and close friends. They were happy to meet his wish and not only let themselves become Christian, but also converted their followers. This leads us to the conclusion that if a chieftain lets himself converted, he would ask the same from his people, making the process easier than converting each and every person at a time. It was probably enough for the king and his close men to convert chieftains in order to Christianize a whole community because the farmers, as well as the other men inferior to the chieftain, would most

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<sup>113</sup> *Olav Tryggvason's saga* 47

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 50



likely follow their leader's example and take the new religion themselves. Consequently, the king must have tried to convert the people who had a bigger influence in the country than the small farmers because in this manner it was easier to cover a larger population. On the other hand, the missionary clergymen who were sent by the king to spread the words of God were more likely to deal with the smaller farmers and to answer their questions and doubts concerning religion.

After converting his close friends and family, Olav Tryggvason started his Christian mission on a more serious level. *Olav Tryggvason's saga* relates that the king first preached about God to the people from Vik. He probably chose this region because Christianity here was not unknown. According to Snorri Sturluson, the Danish king, Harald Bluetooth also tried to Christianize Vik when it was under his reign and managed to convert many of the farmers. However, after his death most of these people returned to the old belief. The saga relates that Olav was successful in converting the eastern part of Vik, but that he faced some opposition in the northern part of the region where he had to use his manipulative abilities, threats, violence and banishing people from the country in order to achieve his goal. Nonetheless, he managed during one summer to Christianize the whole region of Vik. The reason why it was easier to convert the eastern part of Vik may be that Denmark had more Christian influence there than in the northern part of the region.

After his success in Vik, Olav Tryggvason continued his missionary activity in Agder. Here he held several assemblies in order to convince the chieftains and their farmers to take Christianity as their new faith. Since he had a great deal of power, the farmers were afraid to speak against Olav's will and therefore they all accepted the monotheistic religion without showing any opposition<sup>115</sup>. The saga describes that the farmers were fearful towards the new king and that they were not able thus to disagree with him. Thus it is possible that they only accepted Christianity so that the king would not turn against them, without actually changing their real beliefs. However, we cannot be certain about this matter. Moreover, the fact that Snorri describes that the Agder farmers were afraid of disagreeing with the king could also only denote how powerful Olav was, especially in comparison with the first missionary king, Haakon the Good.

Nonetheless, the country still disposed of brave men who did not agree with Olav Tryggvason's actions that included the destroying of the old *siðr*, and who decided to take a

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 54

stand by trying to challenge the king in Rogaland. The sovereign agreed to meet the disappointed farmers and their masters at the assembly where three of the best orators agreed to represent the opposition. Their main goal was to let the king know that they would not agree to break the old laws and traditions, no matter who asked them to do so. Here again Snorri points out how important it was for the farmers to stick to what they have been familiar with for all their lives, to the customs of their forefathers and to the old laws that had worked have been working well for them. The first one to speak was the king who bade his people nicely at first to renounce the old faith and embrace Christianity. However, after realizing that the people may not agree with his wish, Olav started to warn them, threatening them that if they did not do as he pleases, then he would make them suffer by taking revenge on them. After this speech, the three wise men tried to make their opinion heard and to oppose the king, but were not able to do so. According to the sagas<sup>116</sup> one of them choked and therefore could not speak anymore, another one hesitated too much and seemed too shy to say anything, and the third's voice became so thick that nobody could understand what he was saying. Thus, having no one to speak against the wish of the king, the people had no other choice but to accept the new laws and the new religion. Moreover, Oddr Snorrason blames the divine intervention for not allowing the three men to speak against Christianity. He relates that this divine intervention convinced the farmers that, indeed, the right religion was the Christian one. If we are to consider this event to be a historical reality, it is possible to believe that the three men were probably not able to speak against Olav Tryggvason not because of the divine intervention described by Oddr Snorrason, but because they were too much affected by the king's threats and were afraid to say anything against him. This could also explain why no one else tried to defend their old laws. They were most likely too frightened of the king's threats and power and of what he could do to them if they tried to oppose him. Thus the sagas tell us that these people from Rogaland accepted to be baptised, but only because they were threatened and because they were not powerful enough to stand against Olav Tryggvason. Consequently, the king was able to force these people to convert to a new religion, but could not actually make them believe in the new ideology. Probably the most important reason why it was difficult to change their real belief is because it was so much bounded to their ways of life, to their laws and to the ancestor cult. Therefore the role of the missionary clergymen was crucial in order to make the farmers change their original mentality so that they could believe in the new faith.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 55 and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*

When he arrived to the Gulating in order to Christianize the people from Hordaland, Olav Tryggvason faced an opposition that was able to express itself and that was represented by Almod the Old, a local nobleman. The people from here admitted that they would accept Christianity, but only if the king would thus reward them with gifts and only if he would agree for his sister Astrid to marry one of their men, Erlingr Skjalgson. The king agreed to fulfil their wishes and so everyone from Hordaland received baptism and became Christian<sup>117</sup>. In the case of Christianizing Hordaland, if the sagas are correct, the reason for opposing the king is different than in the one from Rogaland. Here the people, or at least the chieftains, probably did not care about faith or about the change of faith. But they did, however, cherish the political power that a royal marriage and the support of the king could bring them. They did not embrace the new religion for ideological reasons, but for political ones. In this case the farmers probably had no words in the decision making of their masters and they just followed what they decided.

When Olav Tryggvason went to Dragseid and held an assembly there in order to convince the people from Sogn and Fjordane, Southern Møre and Romsdal, he brought with him many men, forming a powerful army. At the assembly the king told the people that they may either convert to Christianity or fight his army. Since Olav's armed force was very strong, the farmers and their chieftains realized there would be no point in battling against the king. Therefore they accepted baptism. In Northern Møre the Norwegian king decided to adopt another tactic in order to convert the people<sup>118</sup>. He gave up the friendly preaches and went directly on threatening the crowd. Knowing they cannot defeat the king's army, they had no choice but to surrender to Christianity. Here again we can see how important it was for a king to have powerful allies as well as a strong division. When it comes to the assembly from Dragseid Snorri Sturluson and Oddr Snorrason have different perceptions of what had happened. In contrast with Snorri, Oddr describes that at this assembly Olav Tryggvason held very inspiring speeches about Christianity and that the people were so impressed by them that they gladly accepted Christianity, without the king being forced to use threats against them. Unfortunately, we do not know which one of the writers displayed the correct information, if any of them did so.

Besides his missionary work of converting the Norwegian heathens to Christianity, Olav Tryggvason also dedicated his time to destroying the old temples. Such was the case with the

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<sup>117</sup> *Olav Tryggvason's saga* 54, 56, 57 and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*

<sup>118</sup> *Olav Tryggvason's saga* 59

cult place from Lade, where the king took away all the riches that were found inside and afterwards burned it down. He probably believed that this type of buildings was as important to the heathens as churches were to the Christians. In addition, by devastating the temples he showed the farmers that his religion was more powerful than the old one since the heathen gods were not able to punish him for his actions. Therefore he persuaded them to follow his beliefs.

Not everywhere in the country people were hesitant about changing their religion. For instance, when Olav Tryggvason went to Ringerike to do missionary work, the community was glad to receive him and everybody adopted the new religion freely. The most important person in this region, Sigurd Syr, the king of Ringerike, was, according to Snorri Sturluson, not indecisive at all about converting to Christianity and did it deliberately. In addition, probably due to the good relations between Olav and Sigurd and due to the latter's rapid acceptance of Christianity, the King of Norway acted as the godfather of Sigurd's stepson<sup>119</sup>, who turned out to become the major saint of the country, Saint Olav.

Probably Olav Tryggvason's biggest challenge during his missionary work was to try to convert the people from Trondheim. They were not only famous for being heathens and for not giving up their faith easily, but also for their power and influence in the area. When the king arranged an assembly at Frosta in order to talk to the people about Christianity, the farmers expected him covered in weapons and ready to start a battle against him if he would use threats in order to convert them. The farmers also reminded the king that he would not be the first royalty they would go against, since they had done the same thing to the first one who tried to Christianize them, Haakon the Good. The Tronds were still powerful and had many men to gather an army that could stand against the king's army. In consequence Olav Tryggvason decided to make peace for the moment with the farmers, telling them in addition that he wished to join them to a *blót* the next summer at Mære. In this situation the king acted wisely. Since he was aware that he could not, at that moment, stand against the Tronds, he decided to face them another time, when he will have a better army and when he will be better prepared for them. Olav Tryggvason kept his promise and returned to Mære during the next summer. This time, however, he brought with him a large army in order to make sure that the Tronds could not stand a chance if they were to decide to battle against him. After he arrived, he tried again to convince the farmers to adopt Christianity, but he was immediately

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 60

confronted by a respected farmer called Skeggi who told him that he and his people would not abandon their old laws and customs. According to Snorri Sturluson, Skeggi's speech about not giving up the old ways was very appreciated by the farmers from Trondheim who started cheering and applauding their representative<sup>120</sup>. From their behaviour we may conclude that, unlike for instance the people from Hordaland, the Tronds were actually passionate about their faith, as well as about their old customs and laws which permitted them to have good experiences and which were implemented by their ancestors who were important for them and who were considered wise in decision making. However, since the king was cunning and wise, he knew what to do in order to make the Tronds change their minds. He said he would accept to go inside the heathen temple in order to see a sacrifice. This decision made the farmers happy and so they agreed to let the king inside the temple at first with only few men, among whom there was also Skeggi. They believed there was no need for the armies to join them, since Olav seemed reconciled with the idea that he could not be able to convert these people. However, inside the temple the king surprised the farmers by destroying a Thor statue and by killing Skeggi. The death of the powerful farmer made the other Tronds rethink their plan of remaining heathen. They realized that Olav Tryggvason was indeed stronger than them and that a battle against him would only lead to their own misery. Consequently, they had no choice but to accept Christianity and to receive baptism. The Tronds represented the strongest opposition against Christianity in the country. Nevertheless even they were defeated by King Olav Tryggvason. Thus it may be concluded that probably no other communities dared after this episode to stand against the wish of their sovereign. The sagas, however, do talk about few other cases in which individual men tried to oppose Christianity, but it is likely that these cases are but the result of the writers' creativity.

#### Chapter III.3.d: Olav Tryggvason's fall

Olav Tryggvason's reign over Norway lasted a short period of time in comparison with that of Haakon the Good or of Earl Haakon. According to the sagas, around the year 1000 Olav was ambushed on sea not by just one enemy, but by three enemies working together and uniting their armies in order to defeat the Norwegian king. From this we can conclude that Olav Tryggvason was feared, respected and seen as very powerful not only by his own people, but also by the neighbouring countries, who not only had to make an alliance in order to be able to stand against Olav, but who also attacked him by surprise. This alliance

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 69

consisted of the Danish king Svein Forkbeard, the Swedish king Olaf Eiríksson and one of Earl Haakon's sons, who were still alive, Earl Eirik of Lade. During this ambush which took place at Svolder, on sea, the Norwegian king managed to fight bravely against the enemies. Eventually he fell from his ship into the sea and was never found again<sup>121</sup>. Snorri Sturluson relates that although some people thought that the king managed to escape alive, it is most likely that he did not, for he was never seen or heard of after this event. He probably drowned while trying to reach one of his men's ships. *Olav Tryggvason's saga* relates that the main instigator who convinced the kings and the earl to fight against the Norwegian king was Queen Sigrid the Haughty, who was offended by Olav's actions towards her and who promised him that these actions would lead to his death<sup>122</sup>. Nonetheless, this detail could also represent the novelty of Oddr Snorrason which was later taken over by Snorri Sturluson.

### Chapter III.3.e: Conclusions

During his reign Olav Tryggvason converted many communities in Norway, but he also extended his missionary work to Iceland and the Orkney Islands. He also baptised Leif Eiríksson, the first discoverer of America, who agreed to take a priest with him to Greenland in order to convert even more people to Christianity. Thus his missionary work is of great importance. Even though he only ruled Norway for a short period of time in comparison to Haakon the Good and Earl Haakon, he was very active in his mission of conversion, making it possible for him to Christianize all the heathen communities he went to.

According to the sagas, Olav Tryggvason was a dedicated missionary king who, during his entire reign, did not stop from converting heathens to Christianity wherever he went in the country. His methods of Christianizing the farmers were not always nice, sometimes forcing the people or threatening them with torture. Theodoricus Monachus defends Olav's unorthodox methods of conversion by stating in *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* that in the case of the heathens that are the most savage and barbaric, only force and threats could make them adopt Christianity. It is important to understand in this context that in the Middle Ages, when Monachus wrote his saga, Christianization was seen as a process of salvation of the souls. Probably according to the mentality of the writer's time, although the king used force in order to convert the people, he did that only for their own good, in order to save them from eternal damnation<sup>123</sup>. What we may see as cruel and against

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 121, 122

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 61 and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*

<sup>123</sup> *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* 11

the human rights today, during the reign of Olav Tryggvason as well as several centuries after his death, these procedures were probably not seen as malevolent, sadistic and heartless. The king, as well as his men who were using force in order to Christianize the farmers, were probably thinking that their actions were fully justified and that they were actually helping the people.

Oddr Snorrason, the first who wrote a saga about King Olav, shares similar ideas about the process and methods of conversion as Theodoricus Monachus. According to him, Tryggvason was God's representative who's role on earth was to save humankind by Christianizing as many people as possible. Oddr considered the king to be the people's apostle and the teacher of the right religion. As Monachus, Snorrason also considered the king's actions to be fully justified. However, unlike Monachus, he gives more details about how the king Christianized the people, about his different methods. He also relates some events which are clearly fantastic, making the saga be considered more a literary work and less a historical source. The reason why Snorrason uses so many supernatural descriptions in his saga may be in order for him to underline that, in his opinion, Olav Tryggvason was sent to earth by God himself in order to do his work, namely to Christianize and save souls from damnation.

Unlike the two mentioned writers, Snorri Sturluson tries in his *Olav Tryggvason's saga* to be more rational by reducing the number of fantastic events that surround the king and by admitting that some of the methods used by Olav in order to Christianize the Norwegians, such as threats and torture, were cruel. Nonetheless, the historian probably pointed these traits out in order to highlight that the second missionary king of Norway was an untamed Christian in comparison to Olav Haraldsson. St. Olav represents, in Sturluson's opinion, the best model of the missionary king, the fundamental and absolute saint and saviour. Snorri Sturluson's writing about the process of conversion seems to follow a more rational line. He describes the king to first conduct his missionary work towards the ones who seem more likely to follow his beliefs, such as his family and friends, and then towards the regions where Christianity had already been known and accepted from before, although maybe many people returned to heathendom under Earl Haakon's influence. Snorri describes that only after converting the communities which were easier to convince, the king moved towards the more heathen ones, such as the ones from Trøndelag or Northern Norway. Unlike Oddr Snorrason and Theodoricus Monachus, Snorri Sturluson also tries to understand and explain why the farmers were hesitant or even against adopting Christianity. He tries to see the conversion

process also from the point of view of the farmers. Nevertheless, it is impossible to express with certainty his level of success in this matter.

During the reign of Olav Tryggvason many people had already been introduced to Christianity, such as the ones from the Vik region, and did not oppose the king's wish to receive baptism and become Christian. Others, even though they were aware of the new religion and were familiar with some of its characteristics, still hesitated to convert. According to what we know from Snorri Sturluson's saga, their main reason of scepticism towards Christianity was that their ancestors chose heathendom in favour of the new religion. Since these ancestors were, in their opinion, much wiser than them, there was no doubt that their decision was the right one. In addition, after King Haakon's death, during the rule of the Eirikssons who were Christian, the country faced problems such as famine since the harvests were unproductive. The farmers must have blamed the bad seasons on the heathen gods' wrath. They were believed to be unhappy that they had forsaken them. However, during Earl Haakon's reign, when the temples were rebuilt and the sacrifices were supported by the ruler, the harvests started to improve, and peace and prosperity were again established in the country. This made the farmers believe that the gods forgave them for their misbehaviours. Having these memories in the background, it is safe to assume that they were afraid to turn their backs on the gods again.

Nonetheless, Snorri Sturluson also believes that some people hesitated to convert to Christianity for other reasons than the ideological one. As seen in Hordaland, there were some small chieftains who did not seem to care about religion, considering other factors to be more important. And since they were aware that Olav Tryggvason would go through many troubles in order to convert his country, these people must have thought that they could obtain favours from the king if they accepted his offer of embracing Christianity. In such cases, the hesitation was used as a political instrument. Although the saga explains how these small chieftains felt about the change of religion, we do not know how the farmers under their rule felt about this development. But since it is usually the case that the farmers agree and follow their chieftains without opposing them, they probably agreed to what their masters decided. In conclusion, just as their chieftains, they probably found the religious issue as irrelevant.

The idea that the farmers and their chieftains from the Trøndelag area showed a lot of resistance against the king's wish to convert them seems fitting, since the sagas describe



these people as the most heathen of all the Norwegians. They were also very powerful, making it more difficult for Olav Tryggvason to react against them. Nonetheless, the king managed, by killing the leader of the farmers, to make everyone obey him and accept the Christian baptism. Although they were many and powerful, they showed no opposition after the death of their ruler. It may therefore be concluded, first of all, that they were not accustomed to lose and that when they loosed an important man, they did not know what else to do but to surrender. Secondly, it emphasizes the crucial role of the chieftain as a mediator between the king and the farmers and that this chieftain had, among other things, the role to represent his people. The Tronds did not know how to defend themselves without their leader and thus decided to follow the king.

Olav Tryggvason can be characterised as a strong leader who was able to obtain what he wanted, the best examples being: becoming the king of Norway and converting his people to Christianity. He would not accept people disobeying his wish and could therefore make use of methods such as threats, force and torture. This made him look cruel especially in the eyes of the ones who were threatened, forced to do things against their will or tortured, or in the eyes of the modern reader of the sagas. Nonetheless, Olav Tryggvason, as well as his followers and supporters, probably saw his methods as reasonable, since the purpose of these actions was good, namely to convert the people to Christianity in order to save their souls. The salvation of the soul, which was immortal, was probably more important, in their opinion, than the salvation of the body, which was ephemeral.

#### **Chapter III.4: Final conclusions of the chapter**

The rulers of Norway had a very important role in the religious matters of the country. However, when it comes to Christianizing their people, they alone were not capable of making decisive changes. However, especially in the case of Olav Tryggvason, the ruler probably had the biggest influence in the matter of changing the religion. The more powerful the ruler was, the easier it became to influence the farmers on the ideological level, since their respect towards the sovereign was proportional with his power.

Haakon the Good represents a significant figure in the history of Norway. He was the first king who tried to Christianize the country, this making him face the biggest challenge. Even though during his reign as well as before that there probably were some Norwegians who were acquainted with Christianity and some who even had adopted the new religion freely, the monotheistic faith still represented something new to the majority of the farmers. This

made it difficult for the king to convert his people. It is probably easier to convince the masses to adopt a faith which is familiar to them than one of which they know nothing or almost nothing about.

Haakon the Good was not the most powerful sovereign of Norway. In consequence many of his people did not fear him, nor did they respect him as much as they should. From this it may be concluded that the farmers saw his wish of converting them with scepticism. They even had the power to deny granting him this wish and to make the ruler participate actively in their heathen sacrifice. One reason why the farmers were doubtful about the new religion may be that their ancestors were heathen. Since they considered their forefathers to be wiser than them, they must have believed that the precursors chose the polytheistic *siðr* because they knew it was better. Moreover, Christianity did not fit with their lifestyle which required them to work daily in order to get the food and the goods that were necessary to sustain them. If they were to become Christian, they were supposed to not work during Sundays, thing which they thought to be impossible if they wanted to obtain all the goods that would make their lives optimal.

Although the sagas talk more about Haakon the Good's failure in converting the farmers to Christianity, there are reasons to believe that the king actually Christianized more people than the sagas admit. The stone crosses from the west coast of Norway dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as the discovery of a possibly Christian graveyard from the 10<sup>th</sup> century support this theory. The reason why the sagas do not give many details about Haakon's success may be that the writers saw him as an unfaithful Christian who later returned to heathendom. In addition, by highlighting his lack of success they could underline the importance of the next two missionary kings who were considered more crucial than Haakon the Good.

However, Haakon the Good was an important missionary king, first of all because he took the challenge of being the first sovereign to try to convert his heathen country to an unfamiliar religion. Since he actually managed, without using threats and violence and without being the most powerful man in the country, to Christianize several parts of Norway, it is reasonable to believe that his role in the process of conversion is valuable. Unlike the next missionary kings, Haakon the Good had never used force against his people in order to convert them. This may be explained first of all by the theory saying that he did not have the military power to turn against some of the most influential chieftains in the country. Second, because he

probably did not agree with such treatments. He might have believed that threats and force were not the right way to convince people that the Christian religion is the good one. He probably disagreed with using the wrong methods for the right cause. But due to his kindness and gentleness he was also not able to convert as many people as, for instance Olav Tryggvason, who was no stranger to the violent methods used against the people who refused or hesitated to convert.

Not too long after the death of Haakon the Good a heathen ruler had conquered the throne, Earl Haakon Sigurddson. Since he was a believer in the old way and since he had a lot of influence in the country, many people were reinforced through his behaviour to return to the old faith. Another factor that was in favour of the old religion was that, after the king's death, the country suffered from poverty and bad harvests, blaming the famine and unhappiness on the old gods who were disappointed on the people who had forsaken them. Consequently, many returned to heathendom and begun to practice the sacrificial offerings again, in order to reconcile with the gods.

Under the rule of Earl Haakon, especially after his battle with the Jomsvikings and before the last years of his reign, people were happy, the harvests were good and there was peace in the country. The earl participated in many sacrificial rituals, rebuilt the broken temples and protected the other cult places, thus encouraging people to be heathens again. It was probably not difficult for the earl to make the people return to the old *siðr* and he most likely did not even have to do anything to convince them. The old faith was still tied to the lifestyle of the farmers who now were probably just happy that they again had a ruler who shared the same ideology as they did. Nonetheless, although many farmers must have returned to the heathen faith, this does not mean that everyone in the country did the same. It is likely that many people chose to remain Christian. The sources do not mention Earl Haakon engaging in bringing the old *siðr* back and he probably was not bothered his people's faith, whether they were Christian or not. Haakon the Good, like the earl, can be considered tolerant. Even though he tried to convert as many people to Christianity as he could, when he saw that the opposition was too great, he probably agreed to let anyone chose to believe in what they wanted. Moreover, unlike Olav Tryggvason, he probably had never destroyed any heathen temples.

As it may be concluded from *Heimskringla*, the farmers considered it important for their sovereigns to sacrifice for the gods. Moreover, it may be indicated that in their opinion the

leader of the country should also be the leader of the *blót*. This idea is probably tied to the one saying that the sovereign is blessed with the luck of the gods. Consequently the farmers probably believed that if such a person is the head of the *blót*, it should be certain that the gods will listen to them and fulfil their requests.

The period under the leadership of Earl Haakon was not always undisturbed by mischievous events. The sagas relate that during the last period of his dominion, the earl begun behaving more and more abominable. He became cruel against his men, malicious and especially inadequate towards women. Consequently, the farmers rose against him, showing that they were powerful and most notably that honour was more important for them than the religious affiliations of their ruler. During the reign of Earl Haakon the heathen faith must have still been influential, but not as important as the farmers' honour.

The reign of Olav Tryggvason was short, but crucial from a religious perspective. Unlike Haakon the Good, the new king of Norway who ruled after the decapitation of Earl Haakon, was very decisive in his plan to Christianize the Norwegian farmers. His methods were not always gentle and kind and he did apply threats and violence against those who hesitated or refused to embrace the monotheistic faith. However, unlike Haakon the Good, Olav had a bigger army, more riches and thus he was more influential, making him not difficult to dethrone. Being aware of this, most farmers did not dare not to grant his wish and so everyone under his dominion ended up either becoming Christian or being killed. Nevertheless not everyone was sceptical concerning Christianity. As the sagas relate, there were many people who were eager to accept the new faith.

Haakon the Good and Olav Tryggvason both used the same tactic in the beginning of their missionary work. Namely, they both first converted their close family and friends, knowing that they would not refuse them. Afterwards, Olav Tryggvason took his plan of conversion to areas in Norway where Christianity was not an uncommon concept, where people had been acquainted with the new religion either through Haakon the Good or through the Danish king Harald Bluetooth. And only after managing to get enough supporters Olav went on his mission to convert the most heathen parts of the country, Trøndelang and Northern Norway. By the time he confronted the still powerful Tronds, Tryggvason had enough allies as well as all the personal means to defeat them. And after managing to convert the most heathen and influential parts of Norway, everyone else agreed to become Christian.

The most influential farmers in Norway were also the strongest connected to the old faith. These people, the Tronds, could not be convinced by Haakon the Good to embrace Christianity. Moreover, they even had the capacity to threaten the king as well as to force him to take part in a heathen sacrifice. Their power was still big during the reign of Earl Haakon. Even though the earl and the farmers shared the same ideology, the Tronds stood against the earl when his behaviour degraded. This leads to the conclusion that heathendom was important for them, but that it was still not as crucial as their honour and need to be respected. Even during the reign of Olav Tryggvason the Tronds were still sturdy, managing to refuse the king's wish once. However, Olav managed the second time to convince these farmers to adopt Christianity, this time bringing with him a bigger army and acting more cunning thus managing to kill their leader. This action brought discouragement among the farmers who thus granted the king's wish.

The chieftains under the authority of the sovereign also played an important role in the Christianization process. They were usually acting as intermediaries between the farmers and the king. They represented the farmers and their thoughts about the new religion in front of the king. They were the closest superiors of the farmers and they constituted the heads of the communities. The social communities were very important during the 10<sup>th</sup> century especially since the organization of the country as a whole was loose. And in order for those societies to exist optimally, everyone should agree upon the important matters that regarded them all, such as the religious one. As it can be concluded from the sagas, in the majority of cases the chieftain was not only the representative of the farmers, but also their leader, meaning that if the chieftain was to convert to Christianity, so did the farmers under his authority. This doesn't highlight the ignorance of the farmers, but their sense of unity, their realization that, if they do not act as they are expected to, they could be banned or exiled from the community, thus leaving them defenceless and often without the possibility to recapitulate their lives. Consequently, the missionary kings tried firstly to convert the chieftains to Christianity, knowing that in this manner their people would follow their superior's decision.

Haakon the Good and Olav Tryggvason played an important role in the process of Christianizing Norway. The first one is crucial mainly because he opened the road of Christianization to Olav Tryggvason and Saint Olav. He was the pioneer in this matter, taking a big step in making the farmers aware of the new religion. Even though sagas do not admit it, Haakon the Good must have converted a larger population to Christianity, thing which could be supported by material evidence. Olav Tryggvason's importance, on the other hand,

consists in the substantial number of people he managed to convert. Considering the fact that he only ruled for around 5 years, the number of converted people under his influence becomes even more impressive. One of the reasons why he had such great accomplishments is represented by the methods that he used in order to Christianize the farmers, methods which were not always orthodox. His power and strong army also played an important role in his mission. Nonetheless, many people accepted Christianity without being threatened, thus demonstrating that by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century the old *siðr* stopped playing a big role in the lives of the farmers and that the number of farmers who accepted Christianity freely was increasing.

## Conclusions

Although the limited number of sources makes it a difficult task to determine how the Norwegian free farmers reacted to the change of religion during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, by examining the most important written sources such as several sagas and the oldest laws, as well as archaeological finds and runic inscriptions, it is possible to assemble a set of several essential conclusions. The majority of the written sources that are still available today are highly influenced by Christianity as well as by other factors such as the time discrepancy between the moment an event took place and that of writing down the description of the event.

The new faith brought a different outlook on life, a different mentality and a different alternative to the old way of life. Christianity also brought many ideas that were new to the Norwegian farmers, such as monotheism, the inferior status of the woman in comparison with that of men, eternity, fasting, the distinction between salvation and damnation, body and soul, or good and evil. All these new ideas and concepts made it difficult for the free farmers to understand as well as to will to adopt the Christian belief. This presumption is also supported by the tactics used by the Christian clergymen in their mission of converting the heathens to the new faith; they knew it was impossible to convert the farmers by pointing out the revolutionary ideas that come with Christianity. Consequently they first presented them the traits that were common to both religions, thus trying to make the farmers interested in their preaching. For instance, the clergymen could have taught about how important loyalty or honouring one's parents were, about how disgraceful it was to make false accusations, to steal or to kill an innocent. Moreover, in order to make Christianity appealing, the missionaries portrayed Christ on the cross as being a victorious king, as the earliest crucifixes from Norway show us, pointing out how important it was for the farmers, as well as for the rest of the population, to have a strong, powerful and honourable leader. Honour must have had a crucial role in the pre-Christian society and even after the conversion to the new faith, leading us to the belief that humbleness was not preached often because nobody would have listened, nor agreed to become humble. Missionaries probably also tried to create or point out different similarities between the Christian God or Jesus Christ and Odin, Thor or even Baldir. Consequently, it is likely to believe that during the conversion period the missionary clergymen used an *interpretatio christiana* of the old *siðr* and maybe also a religious syncretism in order to make the farmers convert or to make the process of conversion easier for them.

Another tactic used by the missionaries was to show that the Christian God is more powerful and more prestigious than the pagan gods. They probably tried to persuade the farmers into adopting Christianity by stating that, unlike their gods, the Christian one was all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present, that He did not need offerings because He was everything, He was not controlled by another power such as destiny, but instead He controlled everything through Divine Providence, giving man, however, the possibility to choose between Good and Evil. In addition, the missionaries pointed out that the Christian God has more popularity throughout the world than the heathen gods and that the Christian countries have better harvests than the areas within the heathen borders. This shows that another important thing for the farmers was to have a faith that assured them rich seasons, making them pragmatic thinkers. Furthermore, it points out that religion had to be very tied to everyday life.

Although the missionaries tried their to show as many similarities between the two religions as possible and to highlight God's superiority in comparison with the heathen gods, the two faiths were too different not to make the conversion process long and very difficult. For example the old religion, unlike Christianity, represented not only a faith, but also a way of life and it was not separated from the secular, everyday conducts. Probably this is also the reason why they did not have a particular name for their faith, naming it simply tradition or custom. Thus, replacing this important part of life was more difficult than only replacing a religion. The pressure of the conversion, however, made the heathen farmers more aware of the distinction between religious and non-religious activities, and this is probably what led the skalds of the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the need or wish to name their faith, calling it *heiðinn dómr*. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that the new term created in order to name the old religion was not given by the heathens, but by the Christians and it has a negative connotation.

As it can be concluded from the first Christian laws from Norway, probably the most difficult burdens were for the farmers to abandon the old burial customs, the sacrificial offerings, eating horse meat, the belief and/or practice of witchcraft and divination, keeping the dead inside the house for more than five days and the act of deserting unwanted children outside the community's borders. Probably the reason why the laws against the heathen customs were introduced is that people did not stop performing them after the introduction of Christianity, thus stressing the idea that the farmers did not give up their old traditions easily. These laws also suggest that the farmers needed more time to adjust to some of the new things that were incorporated in Christianity. Among these things were fasting, brewing ale before Christmas in honour of Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, baptizing the new born children, burying the dead



exclusively on consecrated ground and having specialized priests who were the only ones allowed to perform rituals and masses.

Due to the idea that heathendom was a polytheistic, tolerant and open religion, it was probably not very difficult for most farmers to add another god in their pandemonium. This made them accept God easier. It is believed that even the usage of religious symbols that did not belong to the heathen religion was approved, as long as these symbols were powerful and helpful. If these assumptions are correct it can be concluded that the old belief of the Norwegian farmers had a pragmatic side, making its believers sensible characters inclined towards success and gain. For them the gods were probably only important if they were powerful enough to help. And this is possibly one reason why the missionaries portrayed God as more powerful than the heathen gods and Christ as a victorious king.

Since the two faiths were so different, it is very plausible to believe that the Christianization process was extended on a very long period of time, probably as long as 6-7 centuries. Scholars tend to agree nowadays that the Christianization process started long before the plundering of the Lindisfarne monastery from England, in 793, some going as far as stating that this process started sometime in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This supports the idea that the change of religion was an exceptionally complex process and that the free farmers from Norway needed a long time to actually adopt the new religion entirely. Even though there are traces that lead scholars to the conclusion that Christianity had influenced the heathen customs on Norwegian soil long before the rule of the first missionary king, it does not necessarily mean that several groups of people adopted the new faith by this time. Nonetheless, it is possible that some people who travelled abroad and got in contact with Christianity adopted the new religion, but they were probably very few and this did not influence other social groups.

Unlike the Christianization process, the conversion to Christianity took less time to accomplish. It started with the rule of the first missionary king, Haakon the Good, and ended sometime in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The majority of the free farmers adopted Christianity during the conversion process, which is integrated in the Christianization. Before the conversion took place there were probably not many people who adopted the new faith. However, some social groups probably integrated some Christian practices in their own traditions, creating a religious syncretism. It is more likely to believe that the new faith had more influence on the people living in the coastal areas of Norway. For these people in particular it was easier to travel to Christian countries, making them the first to experience the new beliefs and ideas.

Thus, the Christianization process in Norway probably started on the coast line, getting to the eastern and northern parts later. Consequently, the process of Christianizing the Norwegian free farmers was not only very complex, but also ununiformed and discontinuous, since Christianity had more influence on the farmers during the 10<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Among the first objects that show us a Christian influence in Norway, if not the actual existence of Christian groups of people in the country, are the stone crosses. According to some scholars the oldest ones could be dated to as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The stone crosses represent a direct influence from the British Isles and were possibly used in order to consecrate burial grounds. However, some of them could also have a more pragmatic purpose since they were positioned right on the coastal lines, namely that of showing the sailors the way towards land. Even if all the stone crosses did not have religious purposes, although that is doubtable, they still indicate a Christian influence, since the same type of crosses is only found in the Christian British Isles.

Also on the coastal lines of Norway, in particular the South-Eastern and the Western parts of the country there have been found several graves dated to the middle and end of the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries that could either be Christian or suffered a Christian influence. Possibly one of the oldest graves that are believed to be Christian or to be influenced by the Christian traditions is dated to as early as around the year 800 and it was found in the Rogaland region. The mere fact that there have been found Christian symbols in graves does not necessarily show that the person buried with these symbols were Christian themselves. It could also indicate that the one buried could have been influenced by Christianity or that the people who buried the dead were either Christian or influenced by Christian traditions. Nonetheless, it at least shows that people were aware and open towards the new faith. Archaeologists have found not only Christian graves or graves influenced by Christianity that can be dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but also heathen ones. This makes it possible to affirm that the old *siðr* was not weak or dying by the time of the conversion to the new faith. Consequently, there was a time when the two beliefs coexisted. This supports the idea that the conversion was a complex process that took place over a long period of time and it did not necessarily influence all the people at the same time, to the same degree.

Conform to the sagas Haakon the Good built several churches during his reign, but these churches were destroyed by the heathens. Nonetheless, scholars are trying nowadays to prove

that there can still be found traces of two churchyards that can be dated to the period during the reign of the first missionary king. These churchyards were discovered at Veøy and were probably built around the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. Besides the Veøy churchyards, the oldest church discovered in Norway is the St. Clement's Church from Oslo and is dated to around the year 1000 or earlier. According to archaeologists the number of churches increases during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, thing which emphasizes that by this time there were more Christians and thus the need for churches grew bigger.

The first runic inscriptions which could be found that give us any information from a religious aspect were carved during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Possibly the most important rune stones that give enlightenment about Christianity in Norway are the Galteland stone, the Kuli stone and the Dynna bridge. While the Galteland and the Dynna stones support the idea that Christianity had become a well-established religion by the time they were carved in at least some areas in Norway, the Kuli stone seems to express the idea that, by the time the stone was erected, Christianity had already been the official religion of the country for a period of twelve years. According to the analysis of several scholars, it is very likely that the Kuli stone talks about an event which took place in the year 1022. That the event may be the legislative assembly from Møster held by King Olav Haraldsson and bishop Grimkell in which they declare Christianity the only official and accepted religion of Norway.

The earliest crucifixes found in Norway are dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is generally believed that crucifixes existed in the country long before these. The oldest ones cannot be found probably because they are perished due to the fact that they were most likely made of wood or other materials that can easily be destroyed in such a long period of time. Nonetheless, the earliest crucifixes that were found portray Jesus Christ as a victorious king who has his eyes wide open, stands on the cross instead of hanging on it and wears a crown. This detail stands testimony to the idea that the Norwegian farmers wanted to follow a powerful, successful leader and not a humble one.

The missionary clergymen had a very important role in the process of conversion to Christianity. They were the ones who had to convince the free farmers to receive baptism and to make them believe that the new religion is better than the old one, that the Christian God is more powerful and more helpful than the old gods and that it should be in their best interest to convert. However, the missionaries were not always treated well by the farmers who

occasionally threatened them or even hurt them. Consequently, during the conversion process there had been created a law stating that it was forbidden by law to kill or hurt any priest. This shows that, at least in some areas, in some points in time, most likely at the beginning of the conversion process, these missionary men were not taken seriously by the farmers. A reason for this may be that many priests were taken by force from their home countries and brought to Norway as slaves. Since this social class was not respected, we can understand why the priests were treated poorly. However, the missionary clergymen had a very important role in the process of Christianization. Without them, the kings could not have been able to convert so many people; they probably could convince or force their people to receive baptism, to go to mass, to celebrate the Christian holidays or to follow Christian laws, but they could not change the people's opinions and ideas concerning religion. This mission belonged to the priests who worked patiently with the people in order to actually convince them that the new religion is more advantageous than heathendom.

Nonetheless, without the protection and influence of the kings, the missionaries could not have managed to travel safely throughout the country in order to Christianize the farmers. In addition, the kings' religious beliefs could also influence the beliefs of their followers, since the farmers would usually act in accordance with the leader. Moreover, the more powerful the king was, the more he could extend his religious influence over his people. Unlike the missionary clergymen, the missionary kings had more power and since the farmers were probably used to following the most powerful, it can be concluded that kings could have been more successful at converting the people than the priests.

Haakon the Good was the first missionary king of Norway. During his reign Christianity was still a new concept in the eyes of the farmers who were still sceptical about adopting the new religion. Thus the king tried to familiarize the farmers with the new faith first through creating a continuity of the cult, by making the people celebrate the heathen yule and Christmas on the same dates. Through cult continuity it was probably easier to make the farmers adjust to the changes in religion. In order to have a Christian base of people in Norway, King Haakon first converted his family and close friends to the new religion, knowing that they could not refuse him. Only afterwards, after gaining more Christian allies in the country, he brought priests from the British Isles, built churches and started his mission of Christianizing Norway. Although he had some success, he was probably unable of continuing his missionary work after being confronted by the more powerful farmers from Trøndelag. According to *Heimskringla*, one of the main reasons why these farmers rejected

Christianity was that they believed the new religion to be unpractical and unfitting to their daily lives and working plans. Moreover, they argued that the old religion was better than the new one, since their wise ancestors chose heathendom instead of Christendom. Consequently, if we are to believe what the saga describes, the ancestor cult was powerful and the people were still influenced by their forefathers' actions, beliefs and decisions.

The most important reason why the Tronds could stand against the king's wish of conversion is probably that they were more powerful than him. The chieftains from Trøndelag were more influential and thus more respected than Haakon the Good. Therefore the farmers did not support the king, but their chieftains. In addition, not only that these people refused to convert to Christianity, but they even forced the king to actively participate in a heathen *blót*. The hypothesis that the farmers wished for their king to be at least present to a sacrificial offering, if not to actually conduct it, points out how important it was for the people to have their leader take part of the ritual. This can be explained by the idea that in the heathen faith there probably was a belief that the leader was supposed to be gifted with certain luck from the gods that could make him bring peace and prosperity to the people, thus making him a very important member of the ritual.

The sagas that talk about King Haakon's missionary activity mainly point out how unsuccessful he was in converting the Tronds and that he must have died pagan since he agreed to eat some horse liver and did not destroy the heathen temples and since he probably stopped his Christian work after his beliefs being aggressively rejected by the people of Trøndelag. Nevertheless, the sagas are likely to underestimate the importance of Haakon the Good who was the first missionary king of Norway, the one who had the most difficult task, that of getting a large number of people familiar with Christianity. Although he was less powerful than other chieftains, he still managed to convert perhaps more people to the new religion than the sagas describe.

Even though Haakon the Good might have managed to convert many groups of Norwegian free farmers, it is believed that after his death many of the new Christians returned to their old religion especially due to external reasons. After King Haakon was succeeded by the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe, the country was faced with very bad harvests which led the people to poverty and misery. In addition, as it is described in *Heimskringla*, the new rulers destroyed many of the old sacred places, not due to religious motifs, but only in order to steal their riches and did not care much about their people. These catastrophes possibly led the farmers to believe that

they are the result of the angry gods who were not pleased with their latest actions, that of embracing Christianity in favour of the old faith. Consequently, fearing the gods' revenge, it is presumed that many of the converted Christians returned to their old religion and started praising and making sacrifices to their previous gods. If we are to agree what Snorri Sturluson's saga describes, then the rule of the Eirikssons and the bad harvests that occurred during their dominion represented a good reason for the farmers to return to the old religion, mainly out of fear, because they did not want to upset the gods anymore so that the gods, in return, would bring back good seasons and peace. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the Eirikssons may also be seen as a mere literary trick used by Sturluson with the purpose to make an excuse for the farmers for returning to the heathen practices. This episode can also be seen as a good introduction and good context to the heathen reign of Earl Haakon.

On the other side another factor in favour of the farmers' return to the old religion may be represented by the dominion of a heathen ruler who replaced the sons of Eirik Bloodaxe. This new ruler was Earl Haakon Sigurdsson. Although he was familiar with Christianity, the sagas relate that he chose to remain faithful to the old gods. Since he had much power and influence in the country and since the people already feared upsetting the gods, the farmers were probably glad to follow their leader's religious beliefs. The sagas do not mention whether or not everyone in Norway returned to heathendom or if the new leader tried to convince the new Christians to return to the old faith. Nonetheless, if the sagas describe the context in which Earl Haakon became ruler over Norway correctly, then it can be concluded that most people did return to the old religion. Consequently, even though many were converted to Christianity during the reign of King Haakon, it is likely that they did not completely forget about their old faith, that the Christianization process was not completed for them, although they adopted the new religion. Many Christianized farmers were probably still sceptical about the new faith and did not forget about the old gods and the old customs completely. This is understandable since Christianity was at that time still a new concept, filled with new ideals and ideas, some that probably were considered strange and unfitting in the farmers' daily lives.

According to written sources such as *Vellekla*, Earl Haakon did try to promote his faith by restoring and building new temples and by offering sacrifices to the gods. His actions seem to have given good results because during his reign the harvests were also prosperous and most of the time there was peace in the country. The farmers probably associated the well-being of their lands with the fact that the old religion was restored, eliminating the doubt about

Christianity being a better religion and God being more powerful than their old gods. The fact that Earl Haakon rebuilds temples and holds sacrifices to the heathen gods discards the hypothesis that the old faith was dying or weak by the time of the conversion. Moreover, it actually supports the idea that the old religion, not only it was not weak, but it was actually popular at least during Earl Haakon's reign and many people were still performing the old rituals probably often, thus needing the temples.

Despite the fact that Earl Haakon was probably appreciated by his people due to his keeping the old faith alive, this thing did not stop the farmers from raging against their leader when his actions became too unfitting for a ruler. Consequently and according to *Heimskringla*, the farmers did rise against Haakon when he started acting inappropriately. They probably considered honour more important than the earl's religious beliefs and even though the farmers were happy with his overall management of the country, they did not accept the earl's behaviour during the last part of his reign and life, behaviour which consisted of conjugating with several women, including other people's wives. This manner of conduct was probably too dishonourable in the eyes of the farmers and other chieftains and therefore they decided to rise against the earl. Here again the personal affiliations of the author may be noticed. By describing the earl's fall in this manner, Snorri Sturluson created a perfect entrance for the Christian king, Olav Tryggvason. Furthermore, the negative characterization of the earl's last stage of dominion may represent just a way of highlighting even more the qualities of his successor.

Earl Haakon was replaced by Olav Tryggvason, the second missionary king of Norway. He is portrayed by Snorri Sturluson as being more effective at converting people to Christianity than Haakon the Good. Still, he is put in a bad light by his use of harsh methods in fulfilling his plan. According to Snorri Sturluson, Olav Tryggvason was better at conducting missionary work than Haakon the Good, but still he was not as capable as the third missionary king, Olav Haraldsson, who is seen by the historian – most likely in a subjective manner – as the example of the perfect Christian missionary king, the ultimate redeemer and saint of the Norwegian people.

Like Haakon the Good, Olav Tryggvason started his missionary work first by converting his closest family and friends, knowing that they would not refuse his wish. Afterwards he advanced to converting the regions in Norway which were influenced the most by Christianity and in which some people were already Christian or were very familiar with the

new religion. Only after gaining enough power and support inside the country he started his missionary work in the most heathen regions where the monotheistic belief was still not so well-known or simply rejected. As it can be concluded from the sagas, Olav Tryggvason mostly tried converting the chieftains of smaller communities to Christianity, knowing that their people will also follow the religious beliefs of their leader. By converting the chieftains, the king managed to Christianize also the whole communities controlled by these leaders.

In contrast with Haakon the Good, Olav Tryggvason is described by Snorri Sturluson as being a cruel king that used all the possible means to convert the Norwegian farmers. Occasionally he bribed people in order for them to accept baptism, giving them goods or privileges, as well as high positions in society through arranging marriages between smaller chieftains and his sisters. From this it is again possible to draw the conclusion that many of the free Norwegian farmers sought for advantages from their religion. They would only follow a faith that brought benefits. Consequently, probably many farmers were practical and realistic, and to them the actual spiritual belief was less important than the material goods and privileges.

According to *Heimskringla*, Olav Tryggvason also used threats or even violence and torture in order to fulfil his plan, to convert the people to Christianity. The king seems to have been very powerful and to have had an army stronger than the one of the farmers who tried to react against him. Thus, they had no choice but to agree with Olav Tryggvason and receive baptism. The king's unorthodox methods also made other farmers, out of fear, to simply conform to his wish and become Christian. One plausible reason why there were many farmers who did not want to convert could be the fact that they were afraid to upset the heathen gods and thus to suffer from famine again, as it had happened during the reign of Eirik Bloodaxe's sons. However, Olav Tryggvason managed to show the people that the Christian God was more powerful than the heathen ones by destroying the old temples and the idols. As portrayed in the sagas, the king's argument for why the heathen gods did not punish his actions was that the Christian God was more powerful, that his faith was stronger than the polytheistic one and therefore he was immune to the gods' revenge.

During his reign, Olav Tryggvason managed to convert a large amount of people to the Christian religion. A reason why he was more successful than the first missionary king is that he had a stronger army than Haakon the Good which made it difficult for the farmers to stand against him. Unlike Haakon, Olav also used bribes, threats, violence and torture in his



missionary work, making the opponents to Christianity incapable of remaining heathen. Another important reason why Olav Tryggvason was more successful than Haakon the Good is that, by the time the second missionary king conquered the throne, a large number of Norwegians were already very familiar with the new religion partly due to Haakon's work, and partly due to being in contact with Christian men more often than before. The more the farmers got accustomed to Christianity, the easier it was for them to convert to it.

In the process of converting the free farmers to Christianity, the most important roles were probably played by the missionary kings and the missionary clergymen. The Norwegian travellers had a significant charge in the Christianization process. They came in contact with the new religion either through peaceful contacts or through plundering and brought new knowledge back home. The Christianization took place over a very long period of time, making the process very complex and heterogeneous. Consequently, probably the majority of the free farmers from Norway had difficulties accepting the new religion, needing several generations in order to actually welcome and adapt to the new faith.

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